

CALICO CAT CAPER



**Lea
Tassie**

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(Adriana Island Cats - Book Five)

by

Lea Tassie

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Grateful thanks to my editor, Leanne Taylor, and to Helen Czerski (*Storm in a Teacup*), for the science.

Authors like cats because they are such quiet, lovable, wise creatures, and cats like authors for the same reasons.

(Robertson Davies)

For John and Anna

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Chapter 1 ~ Cat Complaint

I shifted slightly on my chair, and George the Magnificent, the tabby-Siamese king of Holly Haven, jumped off my lap. He stalked out of the kitchen, ears laid back and tail flicking, obviously annoyed that I hadn't asked for permission to disturb his royal self. "Ben," I said to my husband, "if you want a second mug of coffee, you'll have to pour it yourself. The trustee meeting is at 10:30 and I'm already running late."

Ben put his half-eaten peanut butter cookie on a napkin and pushed it toward the center of the table to keep it safe. Nicky, our fat, white Samoyed, was always on high alert for cookies, whether they were in the air, on the floor, or halfway into someone's mouth. "Anything exciting about this meeting?"

"Duff said there's a long, nasty complaint from a lady down Macklin Road about her next-door neighbor feeding stray cats."

Ben shrugged. "You shouldn't have a problem with that. You and my mother are supposed to be Adriana Island's leading cat experts."

"We have to be, since we're knee-deep in the little fur-covered terrorists." Well, not exactly knee-deep, though sometimes it felt that way. Ben and I were ruled by six cats, with George the Magnificent being the patriarch of our five-acre farm. Next in line to George and eager to boot him off the throne, was Kaylie, a purebred applehead Siamese, weighing in at a mere eight pounds, but with a drive for power more suited to a leopard. Her mate, Ming, and their three kittens, Poppy, Cato, and Caesar, didn't care who was king, as long as they got food, treats, and a clean litter box. At the bottom of the hierarchy, but nearly as keen on clean litter boxes, were Nicky, Ben, and me.

I headed out the back door into April sunshine, climbed into Miranda, my mud-splattered blue Cherokee, and headed for Mora Bay. Adriana Island is not very big, as islands go, and the trip took barely twenty minutes on the narrow, winding road. I always found it a pleasure, except in driving rain, to navigate the steep hills which formed the central backbone of the island, where the fir, cedar and arbutus were showing fresh signs of spring. The small farms in the valley leading toward the bay were roseate with plum and cherry blossoms.

The parking lot at The Yellow Duck, an old, sprawling waterfront pub, was almost empty at this hour of the morning. Though I sometimes complained to Ben about all the work involved in being on the Adriana Trust Committee, I enjoyed the monthly meetings. Coffee fed my caffeine addiction and gossip fed my curiosity.

The only customers in the pub itself were four old men sitting off in a corner, enjoying a beer and no doubt telling tall tales about things that had happened fifty years ago or perhaps even on the Easter weekend, which had just passed. Mitch, the owner, stood behind the bar, leaning on one elbow as he did paperwork. I waved at him and walked through to the small back room he kept for private parties and meetings.

First to arrive, I plugged in the laptop and laid out my files. Then I went to the window and looked out at the boats in the marina and the rainbow of slick, oily water in the slip where the Victoria ferry docked. The water sparkled in the sunlight, and it would have been lovely to have our meeting out on deck, but utterly impractical. The problem with being in full view was that we'd have to put up with people wandering by to complain about the community plan, or the ferry fares, or sheep breaking through fences.

Mitch had left the usual tray of mugs and a coffee urn on a side table, and I had already

poured a coffee when Duff walked in, followed a moment later by Joanna. We'd all been re-elected for our second terms the previous November, much to my relief. The community plan we'd created during our first term had been passed as a by-law, but there were still snags to be ironed out and, since we three had been the ones to write the plan, I thought we were the best ones to fix whatever needed fixing. Also, we were the best ones to defend it. There were always a few people hoping to get rid of the community plan, along with getting rid of us, because they wanted to develop the island into quarter-acre lots, make millions, and ruin the rural, peaceful atmosphere that made the island so attractive in the first place.

Duff sat down with his coffee, white grocer's smock straining across his ample belly. He pulled an envelope out of his breast pocket and slid it across the table to me. "This is the letter from Sybil Axton."

"I haven't met her." When I'd gone campaigning last fall, she'd never been home. I pulled the letter out of the envelope. The writing was spidery but done with a bold ballpoint. The words seemed to spin their way loudly across the page.

"Not surprising," Duff replied. "She celebrated her ninetieth birthday a couple of weeks ago. She gave up her car about ten years ago."

Maybe she had been home last fall but hadn't wanted to answer the door.

"Good for her that she still has the energy to complain," I said, and began reading. Sybil said her neighbor was feeding stray cats, and that the cats yowled and fought and stunk and that Zephyrus Winstanley should be jailed for ruining the neighborhood. I sighed and handed the letter to Joanna.

"Zephyrus Winstanley?" she asked. "Really? That's actually her name?"

Duff laughed. "Yes, and she's even older than Sybil. She's ninety-two, so she told me the last time I saw her in the store, and she's feisty as all get out. She joined the Air Force in 1943 and managed to get in on the last year of World War II, flying airplanes."

Joanna handed the letter back to me. "If nobody else has complained about Zephyrus's stray cats, what's Sybil's problem? Duff, do you know any gossip?"

Joanna was from another island, as required by Island Trust rules for filling the third trustee position. She lived on Melfort Island, a quick powerboat trip across the channel in good weather. In bad weather, she had to take two ferries, with a twenty-minute drive in between, to get to Mora Bay. When I'd offered sympathy, she said it was worth the travel time to hear our stories about the crazy characters who lived on Adriana. But she could usually match us tale for tale about the crazy people she knew on Melfort. Small islands seem to attract free spirits.

Duff put his mug down. "Oh yes, I have gossip. Apparently, they've been feuding since about 1953, when Zephyrus got out of the Air Force and married Abel Winstanley, who had been Sybil's boyfriend. From all accounts, Sybil thought she'd been literally abandoned at the altar."

"Good Lord," Joanna said, counting on her fingers, then running her hand through short iron-gray hair. "That's fifty-five years, give or take. Why do they live next door to each other?"

"Both sets of parents were original settlers," Duff said, "so they inherited their properties."

"Like me," Joanna said. Lean, and still muscular at fifty-two, Joanna ran a small farm and raised vegetables, fruit, sheep, and goats. "Anything else?"

Duff filled us in on the details. Zephyrus Winstanley was a widow, whose only child, an unmarried son, had died a few years previously. Sybil had ended up marrying Foster Axton and was also widowed. She had one child living in Vancouver. "But," Duff said, "she grumbles to me that Thea never visits, and she's considering disinheriting her."

"That sounds kind of mean," Joanna commented.

"She hires people to mow her lawn and wash her windows," Duff said, "and the ones I've talked to don't like working for her. The fact that her daughter doesn't visit has to say something about her character."

"Or the daughter's character," Joanna murmured. She was always trying to keep the world on an even keel. Maybe that came from spending a lot of time in a small boat.

I drained the last of my coffee. "Why doesn't Sybil sell the property and move into town? There are two residences for seniors here. Then she wouldn't be bothered by Zephyrus's cats."

"She's too stubborn," Duff said. "Well, both of them are. And they're both sitting on five-acre parcels on the waterfront, which go up in value every year."

"I know," Joanna said, "but you can't spend the money when you're dead."

"I'll go talk to Mrs. Winstanley," I said. "I want to find out the story about her stray cats and see for myself whether the situation is as bad as Mrs. Axton says."

"I'd go with you," Duff said, "but you know how hard it is for me to get away from the store."

That made me laugh. "You just don't want to get in the middle of a catfight between two old ladies. I'll take my mother-in-law along as reinforcement in case one of them has a hissy fit. Maggie is a lot more tactful than I am."

We discussed a couple of other pending items, finishing up a few minutes before twelve. "Are you staying for lunch?" I asked Joanna.

She nodded. "The ewes will be lambing any time now, but I might have a couple of days before they get down to it." She patted the cell phone in a leather holster on her belt. "Anyway, my niece is sheep-sitting today. She'll phone if anything happens. Last year, one of the stupid creatures broke through a fence and had triplets on my neighbor's front lawn. It took hours to get them home, then we had to go back and clean up the lawn." We walked into the main room, Joanna going into her usual rant about how growing lawns was a waste of time and energy and water and how we should all trade our grass for native moss.

We found a table in the pub and ordered hamburgers and beer. Mitch made the most delicious hamburgers in town, the buns fresh and the patties thick and moist. "I asked Ben if he'd join us, but he's so busy with the garden and greenhouse right now, he barely has time to feed all his animals." Ben was a throw-back to Saint Francis of Assisi, and fed any animal, tame or wild, that looked hungry. Unfortunately for his budget, to which he was also firmly attached, he was convinced that every animal he saw was on the verge of starvation.

"I read something interesting," Duff said. "Did you know that one human hair can support six and a half pounds of weight?" He was always coming up with some new fact that he thought would amaze us.

"Maybe I can experiment with sheep hair," Joanna said. "But how would I get a hair long enough to tie around say six pounds of butter?"

Duff grinned. "If at first you don't succeed get new batteries."

Joanna and I both groaned dramatically.

"Okay, okay," Duff said. "I'll stick to facts. I don't know how one measures what a hair can carry. Obviously not by tying it around butter."

"Maybe you could look it up," I suggested. If he could find all these amazing 'facts,' surely he could find out how to prove them.

Or I could! That thought erupted like a little flash of lightning in my brain. I'd always been interested in how things worked. And I'd been feeling restless lately, so it was time to give myself a new challenge. Oh, not about Duff's collection of 'amazing facts,' but bigger things, like

what made the Earth go around the sun. And little things, too, like why water drops clung together when I splashed them onto the counter. Such knowledge wouldn't help me with household tasks, but it would give me something to ponder while I washed dishes or cleaned litter boxes.

By the time we left the pub, Joanna and I had learned two more of Duff's amazing facts but hadn't made any progress on the problem of feral cats. Our bylaws had nothing to say about cats or dogs, or even about sheep breaking through fences, therefore we would have to use our imaginations in dealing with Zephyrus's ferals.

I walked up to the hardware, intending to buy the twine Ben wanted, but found the door locked. A sign taped to the window said, "Closed till tomorrow. Gone off-island for supplies." There was nothing to do but shrug at the typical island message and go home.

As I rolled down my driveway, three dozen Rhode Island Red hens, a few frilly-headed Araucanas, and Mr. Mighty, the white Leghorn rooster, scattered to escape the Jeep Cherokee. Nicky bounced up and down, wagging his tail and grinning. Not welcoming me, of course, but eager for the treat he knew I'd give him as soon as I got my feet on the ground.

I lugged my laptop and files in through the back door, reflecting for the hundredth time that it should be called the front door, because it was the one we always used. Pretending not to see the mess in the mud room, I went into the kitchen. Ben's lunch dishes were in the sink, looking perfectly clean, but I could almost guarantee that that was because they'd been thoroughly licked by feline and canine tongues.

After I'd put the dishes to soak in hot water, I went on through the dining room and living room and did a hard left across the central hall into my den. I called it my office when I worked on Trust Committee business, and my studio when I was trying to write short stories. But it really was a den, with always at least one or two cats in residence, keeping my easy chair warm or spreading hair on the desk. I had intended to type up the minutes of the morning's session, but the warmth of the April sun tempted me outdoors.

I went through the front door onto the veranda, which overlooked most of our five acres. and the blue, sparkling sea beyond, studded with sailboats sporting billowing white sails, and tiny islands covered with dark green fir and cedars. Across the Strait, mountains rose in deep blue billows, with the distant conical white peak of Mount Baker toward the south. I sat in one of the Muskoka chairs, thinking wistfully of lighting a cigarette. But I hadn't had one for a couple of years now and, as I kept telling myself, it would be stupid to get hooked again.

The meadow, bright with the vivid green of new grass, sloped down to a cluster of cedars, maples, and Garry oaks at the foot of our property. I leaned back in the chair, feeling unbelievably lucky to have such a view, and reminding myself that I should be out here enjoying it much more than I did.

In the orchard to my left, half hidden by the house, the apple trees were in full bloom. To my right were Ben's greenhouse and a huge vegetable garden, surrounded by an eight-foot fence to protect it from the deer. Naturally, the deer didn't go hungry, because Ben bought bags of carrots and potatoes for them in the winter. He paid absolutely no attention to my opinion that the deer had more than enough grazing on the island's wild land as well as unfenced human gardens.

Rose bushes were budding around the concrete patio, a replacement for the swimming pool which had been there when we bought the place. Ben loved swimming but, after a couple of animals fell into the pool, his St. Francis persona took over. He filled it with rocks, cemented it over, and built a rose garden around the perimeter. Not being a water enthusiast, I thought this patio was a lovely place to sit on summer evenings.

Unable to banish nagging thoughts of several necessary errands, I reluctantly rose from the chair. First, I needed to talk to Maggie about visiting Zephyrus Winstanley. Maggie lived in the small cottage we'd built for her, on the other side of Ben's big, fenced garden, so I walked over rather than phoning.

As I rapped at her door, I crossed my fingers that she was feeling happier than she had been for the past couple of months. Two of her cats had died after Christmas and the deaths had hit her hard. She'd adopted them from Norma, her closest friend, when Norma died. I suspected she wanted to keep those cats alive forever, since she couldn't save Norma. But Smoke had already been close to twenty, and Blue Eyes, slightly younger, followed Smoke a week later, perhaps from grief.

Maggie opened the door. "Come on in, Holly."

"Where's BJ?" The longhaired red dachshund was usually at her feet. I followed Maggie into the kitchen and sat at the kitchen table.

"Probably with Nicky."

"Of course. No doubt trying to herd deer. Or guarding Ben and the greenhouse from dragons."

"Yes, we do have a lot of dragons around here." As Maggie put a plate of ginger snaps on the table, her green budgie, Pete, landed on her shoulder.

"How are you, Pete?" I asked.

"Go to hell!" he chirped.

Pete always made me laugh. He'd been raised in a house where everybody swore a lot and, naturally, those were the words he'd picked up. Maggie was smiling and I saw, with relief, that she was looking a trifle less stressed.

"The Trustees have a new problem," I said, hoping the problem would excite her curiosity. I explained about Zephyrus Winstanley and Sybil Axton and their feud, as well as Sybil's complaint about the stray cats. Or feral cats, whichever they were.

"And you want me to go with you and talk to Zephyrus," Maggie said, before I could ask the question. "And meet all the cats, of course."

Maggie had turned eighty-five in November, but her brain was as youthful as ever. The rest of her was in good shape, too, as evidenced by her having a seventy-five-year-old boyfriend, Cal, and the fact that they rode a motorcycle around the island in the summer. Cal, who was our neighbor on the north side of Holly Haven, never seemed to age. His hair was still a faded red, though one or two extra gray hairs might have showed up in the last year. I had to admit I envied him; the silver in my short black hair was fast gaining ground. Or, more accurately, gaining scalp.

"You read me pretty well," I said. "Are you up for it?"

"Of course," she said. "I met Zephyrus once and liked her. Or what I saw of her, which wasn't much. When do you want to go?"

"How about right now?"

We climbed into Miranda and headed south on Macklin Road. After ten minutes of avoiding potholes, we pulled into the Winstanley grass-infested gravel driveway. Those ten minutes had given me the chance to answer Maggie's questions. Yes, the property was five acres, like most rural lots on the island, and yes, it was waterfront. Beach access? No, and not even any beach unless you counted the rock outcroppings exposed at low tide. A realtor might say that the property commanded a stunning ocean view but would try to avoid admitting that the slope to the beach was so steep that you'd need to build a stairway to get down there. And, building a

stairway would mean boring holes into solid rock to secure it.

I turned off the motor, and we sat for a few seconds, surveying what was supposedly enemy territory. I noticed that obtaining that stunning ocean view would require cutting down a lot of trees. Maybe Zephyrus didn't care about having a view.

Partly hidden by an ancient, enthusiastic wisteria vine and a scourge of English ivy, the house looked its age, which was somewhere around a hundred and two, according to Duff. The sagging roof was covered in thick, healthy green moss. The cedar shake siding showed no evidence of paint but had weathered to a silvery-gray sheen. The front steps were tilted just slightly to one side.

"It's a dump," said Maggie, sounding surprised.

"Maybe she likes natural surroundings," I replied. That was the kindest way I could come up with to describe farmland allowed to revert to thick tangles of alder and blackberry vines and a house headed in the same direction. Very natural. The brush was probably impenetrable, too, except for small creatures like cats. To the left of the house, an old, rusted Chevy lay half buried in salal and vines. A one-car garage stood at the end of the driveway, next to the house, but the double doors sagged open to either side and the inside was crammed with boxes and sawhorses and unidentifiable junk, right to the opening. Not even a front bumper would fit inside.

At the right end of the house, its branches sheltering some of the roof, was a big Garry oak, buds opening up into fresh green leaves. A narrow strip of lawn, perhaps fifteen feet wide, lay between the house and the driveway. I revised my opinion of the house. That magnificent tree and the bit of lawn saved the place from being a dump.

"Well," said Maggie, "shall we go see what surprises await us?" She led the way up a moss-edged concrete walkway.

I'd expected a plump little old lady with white hair and wearing a print housedress, but Zephyrus was thin to the point of being skinny and wore grubby jeans, a man's plaid shirt, and holey sneakers. In comparison, Maggie, in her neat slacks and sweater set, looked downright glamorous.

There was also the sharp odor of cat pee drifting out the door, a situation Maggie wouldn't have put up with for five seconds.

I explained who we were, and that we were there because of a letter of complaint from Sybil Axton.

"That bitch!" exclaimed Zephyrus. She opened the door wider. "Well, you'd better come in and tell me what I've done wrong this time."

We followed her inside, and I noticed a baseball bat in the corner behind the front door. Next to the fireplace was a wooden box, not full of wood, but small hand-sized rocks. On the other side of the fireplace stood an old television with rabbit ears. I'd had no idea that rabbit ears still existed. Zephyrus waved us toward a sagging couch, covered with a blanket, which was covered in cat hair. It also exuded a strong smell of cat pee.

Maggie grimaced a trifle, but sat down, and I joined her.

"Would you like some coffee?" Zephyrus asked.

I shook my head. "No, thanks, we had tea at home before we came. And before we get into this discussion, I want to assure you that my mother-in-law and I are both cat lovers."

"Cat lovers!" Zephyrus looked surprised, then her face relaxed. "Oh, I see. Sybil can't get any reaction from me, so now she's going after my cats."

"That's about the size of it. She says they fight and yowl and stink."

Zephyrus removed two young, leggy cats from the upholstered chair opposite and sank into

it. The cats, both light gray shorthairs with white chests and paws, marched away, the backward tilt of their ears expressing indignation. "Those two are called Percy and Pru," she said, "and they don't do any of those things. I keep them indoors."

"Outside cats," I said. "Sybil says you're feeding strays or ferals."

"I am," Zephyrus replied. "Lots of them. I don't know how many there are because they keep having kittens, and I've only managed to get three or four of them neutered. It costs money, you know."

"Believe me, we know," Maggie put in. "Holly has half a dozen cats and I have two." She paused. "Do the ferals come in the house, Zephyrus? There's a strong smell of cat pee in here."

"Really?" Zephyrus glanced around. "I guess I've become so used to the smell that I don't notice it anymore. That's because of Little Cat. She must be sleeping in the kitchen. Or hiding." Zephyrus sighed. "I don't know what to do about her. She's affectionate, but so needy and clingy that I'm sure she's neurotic. I've tried to keep her outside, but she always gets back in. And she pees on things. I've tried to break her of it, but nothing I try works."

"Oh, that's a tough one," I said. "Where did Little Cat come from?"

"She was a stray, not a feral," Zephyrus said. "She turned up at the door one day and I fed her. And she's been here ever since. Her owners may have dumped her because they couldn't housebreak her."

"You must know Jerry, the vet in Mora Bay?" I said. "Have you talked to him about it?"

Zephyrus sighed. "He wants me to bring her in so he can look at her, but I can't afford another vet fee right now. I just got Percy and Pru neutered."

Maggie said, "Holly, why don't you go outside and see if any of the ferals show themselves? Or if they smell? I can talk to Mrs. Winstanley while you're doing that."

I rose at once. Maggie had been an elementary school teacher for years, and there were times when her tone of voice simply did not allow for argument. One obeyed at once and felt the surprise later.

Outside, I went around the garage to the back and found a large vegetable garden, with a fence high enough to keep out the deer. I was amazed to see that the garden was neat and weedless. Obviously, Zephyrus's energy went into taking care of that and the feral cats, rather than the house.

A narrow path led me through the trees and deep salal to the cliff, where I noticed a small spring trickling from beneath a broad sandstone ledge. At least the cats had a natural water source. Another path led me back across what must once have been a small field toward the road. This open area had a few young alders, and many sprawling blackberry vines. Every now and then I heard a faint rustle in the brush and twice caught a fleeting glimpse of feline eyes watching me.

I walked out to the road, then a few yards south, and followed Sybil Axton's driveway to her house. The gravel on the driveway had been freshly raked and jonquils marched in military precision along the edge of a trimmed green lawn. The house was certainly old but gleamed with fresh white paint and I could see that it did have a stunning ocean view. Everything was so neat and clean that I couldn't help wondering if I smelled of cat pee. That blanket on Zephyrus's couch had been pretty rank.

I dismissed the thought. Sybil had started this mess, and if I smelled like cat, she'd simply have to put up with it.

But Sybil was not home. Or, at least, not answering her door. I turned around and walked back to Zephyrus's place.

I was reaching for the doorknob when the door opened. Zephyrus hurried past me and headed for the garage. Maggie stood on the crooked step, holding yet another cat in her arms.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"This is April," said Maggie. "Isn't she gorgeous?"

I couldn't see much of April, since she was wrapped in an old towel, but her head was a wild pattern of black, white, and orange. Obviously a calico. She had green eyes.

Maggie rarely got excited, but she certainly was now. "Zephyrus raised her from a kitten, and she's always been an inside cat. She's about fourteen, Zephyrus says."

"But why are you holding her?"

"Because," Maggie said, "this poor baby needs to find a new home."

The poor baby looked solid enough, through that flimsy towel, to take care of herself, but perhaps not. At fourteen, she was not a baby, but an old lady.

I asked if the other inside cats were attacking her. That seemed the obvious reason for her needing a new home.

Maggie shook her head. "No. And I think we should leave right away because Zephyrus will need to have a cry. She's had this beautiful girl ever since kittenhood, but she felt April would be much happier in a different home. Poor little April has been hiding in the bedroom for the last year."

"But why?"

"Because she doesn't like other cats," Maggie replied. "She ignored Little Cat, but when Zephyrus brought in the two ferals, she hissed and growled at all three. That upsets Percy and Pru, and Little Cat is already a nervous wreck."

"But what on earth are we going to do with April? I've got six cats and you have two. She'll be just as miserable living with one of us."

"She won't have to. I know exactly who is going to give April a home."

Maggie's eyes were sparkling, as they always did when she faced a challenge, and I wondered who she'd picked as her victim. I certainly didn't know of anyone who wanted a cat. Ben, being Ben, would offer to adopt April, but if we took in another cat, George and Kaylie would never speak to us again.

Before I could ask, Zephyrus returned with a battered cat carrier and Maggie popped April into it. I put the carrier on the back seat. Then Maggie, chattering non-stop to Zephyrus, who was obviously trying to keep her bottom lip from quivering, jumped into the front passenger seat. Her air of urgency made me want to hurry, but I managed to back out of the driveway without spinning gravel. After all, we weren't kidnapping that calico on the back seat; we were merely taking her somewhere. And I meant to find out where.



Chapter 2 ~ Complaining Cats

As soon as we were bumping along the pot-holed road, I said, "Come on, Maggie, who are you planning to dump this beautiful cat on?"

"On whom. Don't end a sentence with a preposition." Her command was spoken with the inarguable authority acquired from forty years of telling six- and seven-year-olds what to do. The tone used to bother me, no doubt taking me back to my own elementary school days when I held teachers in awe. But, once I realized that a warm-hearted, intelligent woman lived underneath the frequently adopted mask of teacher-knows-best, I claimed my own adult power.

"That's an old-fashioned rule that people ignore now. Who do you know that wants a cat? It can't be the Dyckmans or Traffords because they're dog people. Florence Miller is allergic to cats. And you can't be thinking of Cal because he already has a calico cat. That takes care of the neighbors."

"Not all of them," Maggie said. "You haven't met Caroline Stewart yet, have you?"

The light dawned. "Oh, the lady who bought the five acres on the south side of Holly Haven. And now I remember you saying that you'd talked to her."

That particular parcel had been virgin territory, for Ben and I found no trace of buildings, or even disturbances, when we'd wandered through it with Nicky. A year ago, a backhoe had cleared a building space and I knew, from driving by, that a small house now sheltered beneath the Garry oaks and arbutus. I hadn't seen anyone except workmen around the place and, in spite of the propensity of islanders for gossip, nobody knew anything about the owner. I couldn't help thinking that if I'd been working so hard that I didn't have time to satisfy my usual curiosity, I must be far too busy.

"That's who I mean," said Maggie.

"But we can't simply dump a cat on her unannounced."

"It's best that way," Maggie said. "She won't have time to think up any reasons for saying no. By the time she does, April will have melted her heart, even if it is made of stone."

"Does she appear to have a heart of stone?"

"No," said Maggie. "Well, she's rather short in her speech, but she's a retired teacher and I can read what lies under that brisk tone."

"Well, it takes one to know one," I said doubtfully. I knew I wouldn't get anywhere by arguing, so I changed the subject. "What else did you learn from Zephyrus while I was inspecting the property and finding out that Sybil wasn't home."

"Quite a lot, actually," Maggie said, "though I can condense it to the fact that Zephyrus is a force to be reckoned with."

I chuckled. "You just told me not to end a sentence with a preposition. How come you get to do it?"

Maggie ignored me. "Zephyrus is energetic, knows her own mind, and is stubborn enough to go after what she wants."

"Is that why she keeps a baseball bat behind the front door?"

Maggie laughed. There came a little querying meow from the back seat, a pathetic sound rather than frantic, and we ignored it. "A few years ago, she woke up and heard somebody on the front step, and thought it was a thief trying to break in. She called the RCMP in Mora Bay but got left on hold for so long she decided to deal with the problem herself. She got a butcher knife from the kitchen and was preparing to attack whoever came through the front door, when she

realized she could hear nothing but silence."

"A butcher knife? Definitely a force to be reckoned with."

"When she looked out the window, the moonlight showed her a deer wandering around the front yard. She decided it could have been the deer after the ivy leaves reachable from the front step." Maggie turned to look at the cat carrier in the back seat, but April wasn't saying a word now. "Anyway, she decided that if the RCMP couldn't be relied on, she'd defend herself. That's when she put the baseball bat where it is."

"What about the box of rocks beside the fireplace? They're the right size for picking up and throwing at somebody."

"I asked if they were weapons," Maggie said, "but she seemed surprised by the question. She said she was collecting rocks of that size to build a border around a flower bed."

"And keeping them inside the house? I'll believe that when I see the flower bed."

"Holly, you're a cynic."

"Oh, well, it was fun to imagine her heaving them at Sybil."

"I discovered the most important thing by myself," Maggie said. "She has no money. When she went to the bathroom, I sneaked a look in the kitchen cupboards, and they hold almost nothing but canned cat food. I know she makes her own bread because a batch was rising on the back of the stove, but otherwise no food, unless there was some in the fridge."

"But," I said, steering around a large gouge out of the pavement and narrowly missing the ditch, "Duff said she'd been in the Air Force for a few years. She should have a military pension, along with the old age pension."

"I didn't want to get so personal as to ask her," Maggie replied. "Well, not yet, anyway. But I'm sure she's spending everything she's got on the ferals. She made it clear that her goal is to look after them."

I slowed the car as I approached Caroline Stewart's new gravel driveway. "Are you sure about this, Maggie?"

"Positive."

Sighing, I turned in, the car crunching over the gravel, and stopped in front of the house. April issued a mild grumble from the back seat. As I opened the door, I said, "I'll do what I can to help Zephyrus. And it's essential to do something about the ferals, because the population will just keep growing, making life tough for birds and people as well as the cats themselves."

"I'll help, too," Maggie said. "She gave me April, trying to do the best thing for the cat. And I admire that."

I did, too, but I was doubtful that this new neighbor would agree with our sentiments.

Maggie pressed the doorbell and, a few seconds later, the door opened. The woman who stood there was small and slim, with short, wavy gray hair and blue eyes which seemed to have already assessed and found us wanting.

"Maggie Sutton," the woman said. "This visit is rather unexpected."

Maggie put her hand on my shoulder. "This is my daughter-in-law, Holly. We have a 'welcome-to-the-neighborhood' gift for you."

"A gift? There's no need for that," Caroline said.

I could tell this lady wasn't going to be an easy sell.

"You may not need the gift," Maggie said, "but the gift needs you."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Caroline, looking around and behind us as if we might be concealing a severe case of smallpox.

Maggie opened the back door of the car and lifted out the cat carrier. She set it on the step in

front of Caroline.

"But that's a cat," the woman said. "I don't need a cat. And I don't want one."

"Have you ever lived with cats?" I asked.

"No, I've never had a pet of any kind. Well, not since I was a child."

Maggie said, "Then, perhaps you'd be kind enough to look after April, only for a day or two, until we can find her another home. She's an old lady and we just rescued her from a bad situation. She's a loner and hates other cats, but Holly has six and I have two, so she'd be most unhappy with either of us."

April gazed up at Caroline with her big green eyes and issued a small, pathetic meow. I was filled with admiration. I couldn't have orchestrated a better reaction if I'd tried.

Caroline looked startled and bent for a closer look. When she straightened, she said, "What did you mean when you said she was an old lady?"

"She's fourteen," Maggie said, homing in for the kill, "and in human years, that's seventy-two."

"Good God!" said Caroline. "That's five years older than I am."

Maggie didn't waste the opening. She picked up the carrier. "Let me bring April in and let her stretch her legs." She turned to me, as Caroline backed into the house. "Run home and bring back a litter box and some food," she said.

I obeyed at once. Maggie was a better politician than me and I was more than happy to let her do the work of getting April in the door and established.

Nicky and BJ were waiting. They could recognize the sound of the Cherokee's engine a long way away. As soon as they got their treats, they whined for me to let the new cat out so they could pay their respects and, if the cat permitted it, play with her. Both dogs had been raised by cats and knew their places. I had to open the car doors and let them see for themselves that it was only the odor of a cat, not the cat itself, that remained inside.

When I arrived back at Caroline's, she led me into a bedroom. I was startled to see April lying stretched out in the middle of the bed, looking regal and perfectly at ease. This cat definitely had an inner princess. "She made herself at home in a hurry!"

Maggie was sitting on the edge of the bed. "It's amazing. She doesn't seem at all frightened. It's as if she knows she belongs here."

Sneaky Maggie! I handed her some treats, and she gave one to April, who took it gently from her fingers, ate it, and began purring.

Caroline stood still, staring at April, and looking surprised. "She looks very fit for an old lady."

Maggie said to me, "Caroline's a walker and hiker, and very fit herself. She expected April to be lame or weak and certainly not able to leap up on a bed." I wondered how Caroline would react when she discovered April could leap up on kitchen counters.

I passed a few treats to Caroline and stood back to watch her and Maggie feed them to April, one at a time. The cat was the most beautiful calico I'd ever seen. Her back, sides, and tail were a patchwork of black and orange, her chest and belly pure white. The fur looked thick and luxuriant. Her cheeks were both black, her nose was orange, and her eyes were green.

I held out my hand and let her sniff it. Then handed her a treat and put my hand gently on her back in order to ruffle her fur. She was a shorthair, but her fur was even thicker than it looked and had a fine undercoat.

"Go around the other side of the bed and look at the back of her ears," Maggie said.

The fur on each ear was divided half and half lengthwise into black and orange, but on the

tips were tiny tufts of white hair, which made her look a bit like a lynx. The back of her head and neck was also split almost evenly between black and orange. "A geometric cat!" I moved back to my original position and noted that the insides of her ears were orange, with a froth of little white hairs.

"I'd have said psychedelic." Maggie gave April the final treat. "Is she a calico or a tortoiseshell? She looks a bit like Cal's Daisy."

"Torties have no white fur at all. They're usually a combination of two colors, like brown and orange, say, or grey and black, and sometimes the colors are closely mixed. Others have a patchwork pattern."

"Where should I put the litter box?" Caroline asked.

"On a tile floor," Maggie said. "A mud room would be best, if you have one, or the bathroom. She might kick a little sand out." I held my tongue. If April was anything like my crew, there'd be plenty of sand kicked out.

Maggie gave Caroline a quick explanation of how to feed and water a cat, and how to find out what she liked to play with.

"And you'll phone as soon as you find a permanent home for her?" Caroline's expression told me she hadn't yet figured out how this cat had happened to her, but she intended to do her best to make it unhappen.

"Absolutely!" Maggie lied like a pro when she was protecting cats. We quickly got out of the house and into the car.

Maggie's mind was still on Zephyrus. "Little Cat must be a tortie then. I saw her in the kitchen. Her fur was a mix of black and cream." She paused for breath. "April seems in excellent shape for being fourteen."

"She's the same age as George the Magnificent," I said. "But a lot heavier. She's got a fat tummy."

"But George is half Siamese, so he'll always be skinny."

"Don't let him hear you say he's skinny. He'll be insulted."

"Oh, I won't! George the Magnificent is royalty, and I do understand that royalty is easily insulted."

"Maybe Cal would take April," I said. "Then he'd have a matching pair of calicos."

"No," Maggie said. "He wouldn't. I've talked to him about it before, and he's definitely a one-cat man."

"And Daisy is a one-man cat. I'm allowed to admire her from a distance, but that's all. No petting."

By this time, we were back in my driveway and the dogs were prancing around, hoping for another treat. I said to Maggie, "Thanks for coming with me today."

"Glad to do it," she said, with a smile, and headed for her house.

I was smiling, too, as I went into mine. Maggie hadn't looked so relaxed and happy since before Smoke and Blue Eyes died.



By the time I got into the kitchen, all six of the feline fur brigade were weaving around my ankles, making it abundantly clear that they were on the verge of starving. I fed them, put a casserole into the oven, and was wondering if I had time to type the minutes of the morning's meeting, when Ben thumped in through the back door.

"Happy hour," he said firmly. "It's been a long day." He poured a beer for himself and a scotch for me and we settled in the living room. "Where did you go this afternoon?"

I told him about Sybil's complaint, and the visit Maggie and I made to Zephyrus Winstanley's house.

"Zephyrus? How do you spell that?"

I told him, and he jumped up. "I'm sure that's the name of a Greek god." Ben's hobby was the study of ancient Rome and he'd given George the impressive Latin moniker of Georgius Felinus Rex about the same time he'd named himself Houseboy and me Head Slave. His enthusiasm for ancient history had since expanded to Greece.

He came back from his den carrying a fat hardcover book. "I found it. Zephyrus is the Greek god of the west wind. 'The gentlest of the four winds, Zephyrus is known as the messenger of spring. People believed that he lived in a cave in Thrace.'"

"He? The Zephyrus I met this afternoon is a she."

Ben frowned as Poppy jumped into his lap and tried to stick her nose in his armpit. She loved the combination of his sweat and deodorant. "Later!" he said to her. "I want to read something to your mother."

Her real mother, Kaylie, was sprawled on the couch next to her consort, Ming. George had just claimed my lap, as usual. Cato, the pure white semi-Siamese who worshipped George and followed him everywhere, was eyeing my lap, too, but he knew better than to compete with the king, so he settled on the arm of my chair. Caesar lay on top of the piano. Nicky lay under the piano bench, feigning sleep but ready to leap up the moment one of us went into the kitchen. He knew that's where the food was kept and lived in hopes that some of it would get spilled on the floor.

Ben used one hand to pet Poppy into submission and read from the book. "Zephyrus was reported in many stories as having several wives. One of them was Iris, goddess of the rainbow."

"That seems to go with being a messenger of spring."

"He was democratic in his choice of lovers, though." Ben continued reading about various jealous spats among the gods.

"I guess perhaps history does repeat itself," I said, and told Ben that Sybil was once mad with jealousy because Zephyrus stole her lover and, according to rumor, was still angry. "I don't know who'll stop her from feuding with Zephyrus. Not likely to be Eros, not at the age of ninety."

Ben frowned. He didn't always appreciate the comments I came up with when I was trying to be funny. He took classical mythology very seriously. "That's about it," he said, and let go of Poppy's scruff so she could stand up and stick her head in his armpit.

I told him the rest of the story, including his mother's success in dumping April on our new neighbor.

"Did you see inside the house?"

"Not enough to tell you any details," I said. "It's a small house, like Maggie's, probably with two bedrooms, but her view of the Strait is like ours. Caroline hasn't done anything outside, though. Not even flower beds, which is surprising. After all, it's spring and she's got a whole five acres to play with."

"Two hectares," Ben said.

Ben had enthusiastically converted to metric when it was made legal but, nearly thirty-five years later, I was still dragging my feet. And Ben was still trying to haul me into the twenty-first century.

"Maybe she doesn't know how to start a garden," Ben said. "If I wasn't swamped with work, I'd go over and give her a hand."

"You could go later. She might still be in the planning stage."

"I will." He stared at his stein of beer for a minute. "Are you sure my mother is up to running around the countryside with you on these cat expeditions? I think she's too old to be doing stuff like that."

"It made her happy," I said. "And I don't recommend that you tell her she's too old for anything."

"Yeah, I know. She'd bite my head off."

"Could you bring me another scotch, please? I have a cat in my lap."

"So do I," Ben said. But at that moment, Poppy decided she'd had enough delicious smells and now had business elsewhere. She jumped down.

When Ben came back from the kitchen with fresh drinks, followed by a dejected and starving Nicky, I'd found a black-eyed pea in my jacket pocket and was rolling it around in my fingers, thinking about the colony of feral cats and wondering what to do about them.

"Why do you have a black-eyed pea in your hand?" Ben asked, as he put my scotch down on the side table.

"I picked it up off the floor a month ago and meant to throw it out, but I was in a rush, and just put it in my pocket. I keep forgetting to get rid of it."

"If it's been around that long, maybe it's time you gave it a name."

Sometimes I didn't think Ben was funny, either. "Taking care of all those ferals will be a big job. I'd better go talk to Melody at the SPCA tomorrow."

Ben smiled. "It's not easy being a Trustee on this island. And how are you going to name fifteen hundred feral kittens when you can't even come up with a name for a black-eyed pea?"



In the morning, I phoned the SPCA. Melody, the director, had some free time at ten, so I left Ben and Nicky to deal with breakfast dishes and drove into Mora Bay. I looked forward to seeing her again. Our first meeting had resulted in Maggie fostering a beautiful tabby called Sir Oliver. The fostering had been tough, since Sir Oliver was as fiercely territorial as Maggie's Doran, but it ended happily. The tabby was adopted by Norm and Kris, the couple who owned tiny Riggby Island.

Melody, a tall woman with short, black hair and a warm smile, greeted me at the front desk. "Holly, good to see you!" As we walked into her office, she asked, "Have you heard how Sir Oliver is doing?"

"Kris phones now and then and tells me the cat is happy. He certainly should be, with a whole island to himself. Well, except for deer and raccoons and whatever else roams those rocky hills. We've been invited to spend a day there again this summer."

"I always love a happy ending," Melody said, sitting back in her chair.

"Me, too, but the Trustees have a problem that may be harder to solve. A colony of feral cats."

Melody leaned forward. "Now, why haven't I heard about this colony?"

"Probably because they're being fed by the owner of the property where the colony is located. Her name is Zephyrus Winstanley."

"Zephyrus? Really?"

"That was my reaction, too," I said. "According to Ben, in Greek mythology, Zephyrus is the god of the west wind. A messenger of spring. However, the lady is ninety-two and poor. She's only been able to get three or four of the cats neutered, and I suspect she's spending most of her pension on cat food."

"So, you're looking for help for her?"

"Yes, in my capacity as a Trustee. Can you take them in?"

Melody shook her head. "What would we do with them, Holly? Most would have to be euthanized because they're not suitable for adoption."

"Oh." I was disappointed, but immediately realized I should have known better than to believe the SPCA could wave a magic wand over the problem.

"All right, let me tell you what we're able to do," Melody said. "The Trustees can apply to us for a grant, which will cover some of the cost of spaying and neutering. You could also get someone to create a volunteer rescue organization to raise money."

"Like asking for donations?"

"That's basic," Melody said. "But the organization could also sell calendars or have bake sales. Members might help feed and socialize kittens, and provide transportation to veterinary care."

I couldn't visualize Duff feeding or capturing cats. But he'd be good at raising money. And perhaps donating cat food at cost, since he owned a grocery store. "I didn't think you could socialize feral cats."

"You can tame the kittens. Eight to ten weeks of age is best, though it can work even up to four months old. But it's really difficult to socialize adult ferals. Such a cat may get used to living in a house, but it will always be a little fearful of humans. Not, as a rule, the kind of cat who will sit in your lap or expose a tummy and let you rub it. Though there are always a few exceptions. I suppose that holds true for any rule."

"The kittens would be different, though." The thought of having new kittens to play with made my insides go all warm and squishy.

Melody shook her head. "Don't get your heart set on kittens. If the colony has been established for a long time, it may be inbred, which means low fertility for the adults and small litter sizes. It can also mean more disease, as well as malformed kittens, many of which die soon after birth."

Sighing, I gave up imagining the fun of raising tiny kittens. And, realistically, George and the rest of the crew might take a dim view of more cats in their territory, no matter how small and cute they seemed to me. "But what happens to the adult cats if they can't be tamed?" I asked.

"They live out their lives in the colony, sterilized, so there'll be no more kittens. Sterilization usually results in reducing hormone-driven behavior such as yowling, fighting, and roaming. It's a standard program called 'trap, neuter, return.'"

"Oh, of course! I've heard of that, but I'd forgotten. I suppose the wild cats are happy to go on living in the wild."

"It's the most humane way of dealing with colonies," Melody said.

"Cats don't live long in the wild, do they?"

"When they're neutered and thus not fighting, they sometimes live for a long time. I read about one cat in a US colony that lived to seventeen." Melody smiled. "Another advantage of having them sterilized is that the vet can immunize them against some of the worst diseases, like the feline leukemia virus and feline immunodeficiency virus."

Her words brought back memories of Henry, my wonderful gray Buddhist cat, who died

way too young of FIV. In spite of my six-pack of cats, I still missed him sometimes. "I'm sure Zephyrus will be happy to know she can still go on looking after her cat family."

"Where does she live?"

"About five miles south of us, on Macklin Road. On five acres of waterfront."

Melody said, "Waterfront? And she can't afford to feed the cats and herself?"

"Inherited waterfront," I said. "And everything is old and falling down. Anybody buying the property would probably bulldoze it flat and start fresh. Tell me, how do we go about capturing feral cats?"

Melody handed a brochure to me. "Read this. You'll need cat traps, and I can loan you four." Then she took a paper from a drawer and pushed it across the desk. "Here's the application form for a spay/neuter grant."

I took the papers, thinking about Tidelines, the column I wrote for our weekly island newspaper, the Adriana Advocate. I could certainly use that to promote the idea of a feral cat rescue group, though I'd have to be careful not to overdo it in case my boss, Scott, was less than enthusiastic. But I was pretty sure he'd be okay with it.

"Bring the form back when you've filled it out and signed it," Melody said. "I'll add my comments before I send it to the head office."

I thanked her and said goodbye.

I'd have to take the form to Duff and get his opinion but, first, I needed to go talk to the most important individual in my new venture, Jerry, the veterinarian. We'd first met eight years before, when Ben and I moved to the island and adopted George the Magnificent. Jerry was tall and slim, with curly brown hair and glasses and, the first time I saw him, I thought he looked about sixteen. However, his two kids were now both in college and, though a quick glance still said he looked sixteen, he was going on forty at least.

Jerry's wife, Cindy, greeted me from the reception desk when I walked in. Now she worked full-time in the clinic. "How's it going?"

I explained about Zephyrus and her colony of feral cats, and my hopes of getting some funding from the SPCA. I was just finishing my story when Jerry emerged from his examination room.

"Glad to hear you're going to give Mrs. Winstanley a hand," he said. "If we don't get that bunch sterilized, they're soon going to overrun the island."

"It can't be that bad, can it?"

Jerry raised his eyebrows. "C'mon, Holly! A kitten can become pregnant at five months. A cat can have three litters a year. A litter will usually be three or more. If, as I suspect, the Winstanley colony has 60 or 70 members, five years from now there could be thousands of cats."

"Sorry," I said. "I hadn't gotten around to doing the math. But I can see that we shouldn't waste any time getting those animals sterilized."

"Absolutely not," Jerry said, still looking serious. "And I'll tell you another reason why. Mrs. Winstanley told me that Mrs. Axton threatened to poison the feral cats."

"But that's awful!"

"Yes, it is," Jerry said. "If that colony isn't brought under control, there could well be more people thinking about ways of destroying the cats."

"This problem is more complicated than I thought it would be."

"I'll do what I can," Jerry said, "and here's some advice. Make an appointment with me for a particular day and then set out traps the night before. That way, I can deal with however many cats you capture right away, and they can be released back into the colony within a few hours. A

lot less trauma for them that way."

"Thank you." I needed to go home and do the research about feral cats before I did anything else. "How are Clive and Tiberius doing?"

Clive was Jerry and Cindy's old cat, with sleek, mostly black, short hair. He had four white paws and, on his chest, a white dickey that came up over his mouth and nose, punctuated with the black slash of a mustache. All he needed was a top hat and a cane to look the perfect gentleman. Tiberius was one of Kaylie's kittens, named by Ben when he was in his most intense Roman period, and adopted by Jerry a couple of years ago.

"They're both doing well," Jerry said. "Clive has taught Tibby the art of being a gentleman and..." Whatever he was going to add got lost in the confusion of a young woman coming into the reception area. The tabby kitten in her carrier was yelling non-stop. It wasn't a frightened yowling, but more like the kitten was giving everybody a stern lecture.

"Well!" Jerry said, "here's Buttons, still complaining!"

The young woman smiled. "He doesn't like being in the carrier."

"Then we'll let him out," Jerry said, opening the carrier door.

The kitten bounced out and walked around the counter for a few seconds, continuing his lecture, then sat down, wrapped his tail around his feet, and started purring.

Jerry grinned and picked up Buttons. "My life is full of complaints about cats, as well as complaining cats."

I knew, without any doubt, that my life was going to be full of complaining cats for however long it took to deal with Zephyrus's colony.



Chapter 3 ~ Talking About Cats

When I got home from Mora Bay, I didn't have a chance to tell Maggie what I'd learned because Ben needed help in the garden. He was well aware that I lacked a green thumb and rarely ever let me anywhere near the garden or greenhouse. Which was fine with me; I was far happier doing almost anything else. However, the warm, spring days were flying by too fast for him to keep up with what had to be done, so after lunch I was assigned the task of hoeing trenches along the string which marked the military straightness of his rows.

Every now and then I straightened to give my back a rest and admire my world. Under the April sunshine, the farm was beautiful, even the piece I was working on. Ben looked pretty good, too. He hated the fact that he was sixty-three, but nobody would have guessed he was that old. His blond hair and beard had faded over the years to a sandy color that hadn't changed in the last ten. He was still lean enough to get into a pair of twenty-year-old jeans that he wouldn't relinquish to the rag bag, but mostly he wore overalls and a straw hat. With those innocent blue eyes and, especially when he was sitting at the wheel of Bouncing Blue Betsy, his ancient, springless, pickup truck, he looked like a real hayseed.

A slave-driving hayseed, however. About the fourth time I quit to ease my muscles, he said, "Why are you stopping? We need to get this done today."

The sound of his voice roused big, fluffy Nicky and little, short-legged BJ from the patch of grass where they lay, surveying their territory. They trotted over to the fence and whined, no doubt hoping Ben would come out and play. Or magically produce treats. St. Francis couldn't resist the call of four-legged nature, so he forgot about me and went to commiserate with them. And, of course, to transfer treats from his overall pocket to their eager mouths.

I bent to my hoe again. By the time I'd finished the trenches, and left Ben sowing seeds, Maggie had gone off somewhere with Cal.

Thus, it was Thursday morning before I could knock at her door and announce that we needed to have a council of war.

"Why? What's happened?" she asked, heading for the kitchen.

I followed her and sat down at the table while she plugged in the kettle and set out two mugs. Before I could speak, Pete landed on my shoulder and said, "Silly boy!"

"I'm not a silly boy, but you certainly are," I replied. "You must be in a better mood today. At least, you're not telling me to do unspeakable things to myself."

Maggie repeated her question.

"I saw Melody at the SPCA yesterday and also Jerry. They both emphasized how important it is to deal with those ferals right away. Cats breed so fast that if we don't get them sterilized, the island will be swamped with wild cats."

Maggie went to the cupboard, brought out a plate of chocolate chip oatmeal cookies, and sat down kitty-corner from me. "We need to get down there and do something about Zephyrus."

"And something about Sybil, too," I said. "Zephyrus told Jerry that Sybil threatened to poison the cats."

Maggie poured tea. "Won't the SPCA take them? Isn't that what they're for?"

"No, their job is to prevent cruelty to animals. As long as the cats are getting food and water and allowed to live as they please, there's no cruelty. Besides, I doubt they have enough staff to

do major projects like clean up a colony of feral cats."

"I suppose you're right, dear." Maggie took a cookie and bit into it as if she were biting into Sybil's neck. "So it's up to us. Well, I can publicize the problem in the *Looking For Love* column I write for the Advocate."

"And I can do the same with my column. We'll have to recruit help, though, to get the ferals sterilized."

Maggie nodded. "Yes, we will. And I'd like to do something about helping Zephyrus with the expense of cat food."

"The first thing we have to do is go see her and explain what needs to happen. Maybe you can pry more information out of her about her finances."

"Holly! I'm shocked! You know I would never pry."

Maggie's tone was pretend-angry, and she couldn't keep the twinkle out of her eyes. "All right, then," I said, "provide Zephyrus with the opportunity to confess her entire life story to you. I've watched you do that more than once."

Maggie's twinkle expanded to a smile. She said, "Shall we go now?"

"Yes. Every passing day brings the likelihood of more kittens being born. Though Melody did tell me that if the colony is inbred, there may not be many kittens and that even those might not survive."

"Stop worrying, Holly," Maggie said. "We don't know that the colony is inbred. For the moment, we'll have to assume there are, or will be, lots of kittens."

She went off to change. I swiped another of Maggie's delicious chocolate chip oatmeal cookies and went to the screened back door to see if Doran and Shaz were in the open-air cat run, where they usually spent sunny days. They were lying in the sunshine, of course, blinking sleepy eyes at me.

Shaz was a gorgeous Ragdoll with thick, soft-as-a-cloud fur and Maggie's nickname for her was apt: "Miss Blonde Bombshell of 2006, with an IQ of 42 and an attention span of 65 seconds." The attention span expanded to a magnificent 67 seconds if she was being groomed. Doran was a chunky gray and white longhair with an impish expression, green eyes, and a big, frothy tail. He always had to be in the middle of the action, looking at it, climbing on it, sniffing it, making comments. And, if it didn't behave, clawing it. Since he was also intensely territorial, he thought the entire world was his to command.

But neither cat found me more attractive than warm sunshine, so I left them to bask. When Maggie was ready to roll, we walked over to my driveway, and I got a spare cat carrier out of the garage. "Another urgent task," I said, "is to get Little Cat to Jerry and find out if there's anything he can do."

"I agree," Maggie said. "I can't imagine living with that odor all day, every day. But what if Zephyrus is too proud to let you do it?"

"I'm relying on her being fonder of the cat than she is of her pride."

Maggie thought about that for a minute. "I hope you're right. If so, it'll make our job easier. We'll sweep into her house and put Little Cat in the carrier, saying we need to get her looked at right away. You take her to Jerry and, while you're gone, I'll find out about her finances."

I sighed as we bumped over the last pothole and pulled into Zephyrus's driveway. Maggie made it all sound ridiculously easy.

When we knocked at the door, Zephyrus, wearing a faded blue shirt and jeans with holes in both knees, immediately asked, "How is April? Is she all right?"

"She's fine," Maggie said. "We found her a home with a woman who lives next door to

Holly and me. April was making the place hers before we even left."

"What kind of home?" Zephyrus asked, as she backed up to let us 'sweep' in. "Does it have other cats?"

"No cats," I said, "and no dogs. It's a single woman, who recently retired from her job and moved into the house. I'm hoping they'll help each other get settled."

Zephyrus finally realized I was holding a cat carrier. "What's that for?"

Maggie spied Little Cat sleeping on that odiferous couch and scooped her into the carrier while I explained. "I'm taking Little Cat to Jerry. We need to find out if there's something wrong with her. You can't go on having her pee all over your house."

"She doesn't," said Zephyrus indignantly. "Just on that couch. At least, I'm fairly sure it's just the couch. I haven't seen her do it anywhere else." She put her hands on her jeans-clad hips and glared at me. "Besides, I can't afford it. I think you'd better let her out. Right now!"

"The cat is more important than the money," I said. "You can owe me. Besides, if it's a medical issue, she could die."

Zephyrus took her hands off her hips. "Really?"

"I did a lot of research online last night," I said, "and there are several reasons why cats spray outside the litter box. One is mating behavior, if she's not sterilized."

"I'm sure she's been spayed," Zephyrus said.

"But I'll bet you don't know for certain. Another cause is the cat being stressed and anxious. If she was dumped by owners who had her since kittenhood, that might be it. If so, the smell of her own urine makes her feel safer. Or it might be because of all the ferals outside. But she might also have a urinary tract or bladder infection."

I didn't say it, but I was afraid the reason was stress. Zephyrus had said the cat was affectionate, but also needy and clingy. If, like April, she needed a quiet home with no other pets, and her problem did turn out to be stress, that would be very difficult to cure. Zephyrus probably wouldn't want to give up Percy and Pru, the two gray ferals she must have spent a lot of time domesticating.

Maggie said to Zephyrus, "I hope you don't mind if I stay. I'd love to have a chat. Holly will be back as soon as she's taken Little Cat to Jerry."

As I hurried out the door, I heard Zephyrus saying, doubtfully, "Why, no, that would be fine. Shall I make some tea?"

She sounded a little stunned and I had to smile as I got Little Cat and myself into the Jeep. Usually, Maggie was the one who 'stunned' people into submission. Perhaps I was learning how to do that from watching her. I wondered if it would be possible to do it en masse the next time Adriana Island had an election for trustees. Or perhaps I could stun Sybil Axton into minding her own business.

At Jerry's office, I explained Little Cat's problem to Cindy, then again to Jerry when he came out of his examination room.

"I don't have time to do a full exam right now," he said. "But I'll put her in a cage in the holding area and do it later." He took the cat from the carrier and disappeared into the back.

When he returned, he said, "But I will give you some advice. First, you must get Zephyrus to remove the odor of cat pee from her house. Little Cat will keep on urinating anywhere in the house that she can pick up the scent. And, believe me, cats can pick up on scents a hundred times better than humans."

"Whoa! That's going to be a job and a half! I'd better go buy some cleaner."

"Don't do that," Jerry said. He took a spray bottle down from his retail shelf behind the

counter. "Most commercial cleaners have ammonia in them. Cat urine smells like ammonia and the cat will sniff the cleaner and think it's urine and keep on using the area." He pointed to the bottle in his hand. "This is an enzyme-based cleaner which actually breaks down the acid in cat urine, helping to get rid of the smell at the same time as it's getting rid of the urine. The ingredients are based on the idea of helpful bacteria getting rid of the bad bacteria which are the cause of the unpleasant odors."

I took my wallet out of my pocket. "You'd better give me two. And tell me how Maggie and I are going to convince Zephyrus to decontaminate her whole house."

Jerry grinned. "I can usually con an animal into sitting still for me, but I'm no good with humans. I'm sure you and Maggie are inventive enough to con Mrs. Winstanley into whatever you want."

"Well, Maggie probably is." I paused, remembering an experience I'd had with my Buddhist cat, Henry. "Remember Henry?"

"Nobody could forget that boy," Jerry said. "Sweetest cat I've ever met but also the most stubborn."

"The perfect description," I said. "When he decided to be an indoor cat, I tried to teach him to use a litter box and he refused to have anything to do with it. He finally peed about a gallon onto the carpet inside the front door. I cleaned that up with vinegar."

"And, as I recall," said Jerry, "you then graciously decided to let Henry use the entire outdoors as a bathroom."

"It was easier to open doors for him than teach him what litter boxes were for."

"Vinegar works well," Jerry said. "Half and half with water. It kills bacteria."

"It also stinks up the house," Cindy put in.

"It smells better than cat pee," I said. "And the smell does go away fairly fast. I used straight vinegar, by the way. I didn't want Henry ever doing that again."

"A cleaning spray that has orange oil in the ingredients works well, too. Cats don't like the smell of citrus," Jerry said.

"I wonder why."

"I have no idea," he said. "That's how science works sometimes. We know that something works, but research hasn't yet come up with the cause."

"I'll give you the recipe for making citrus cat repellent at home," Cindy said. "It doesn't remove the smell of urine, but it keeps cats out of my garden. You can use the spray on furniture, walls, or any parts of the floor you want a cat to avoid, too."

"Can you email the recipe to me?" I asked. "I'll make some and give it to Zephyrus."

"Perfect!"

Jerry's next appointment arrived, two exuberant Shelties who appeared to believe the entire world had been created for their entertainment. I retreated from their eager noses and paws into the Jeep and sat there for a moment, worrying.

If Little Cat had peed all over Zephyrus's house, it would be easier to burn it down than clean it. I could see Maggie and me being there for weeks, scrubbing walls and floors and bedding and whatever else had taken a hit.

And that stinky couch! It would take forever. First, it had to be doused in cleaner. Then we'd have to mop up the liquid with paper or cloth towels. Since cushions would take days to dry, we'd have to lay aluminum foil down before putting the cushions back, then put a second layer of foil over the cushions to discourage Little Cat from peeing on them again. And, since she could have sprayed vertical areas as well, they'd have to be cleaned the same way, with foil pinned to

cover them while they dried. And that whole process would likely have to be repeated several times before the smell had entirely disappeared.

When I realized we'd also have to deal with mattresses, I wanted to put my head on the steering wheel and moan.

The more I thought about it, the more a big fire appealed to me. But there was a limit to what we could do, and certainly to what Zephyrus would allow. Burning the house down was well beyond anybody's limit. I sighed, started the Jeep, and headed across the island, only then remembering that I'd committed to paying for Little Cat's vet care, without giving any thought to Ben's probably explosive reaction to my ruining his budget yet again.



When I arrived back at Zephyrus's driveway, I found there was no room for me to park because a large pickup truck sat in the middle of it. On the door was a sign, outlined in flowers, which said, *The Garden Guys*. Was Zephyrus hiring people to look after her garden? Maybe that's why she had no money to feed herself.

I parked on the side of the road, and walked past the truck toward the front door.

Then stopped and did a double take. The stinky couch, complete with stinky blanket, was outside, next to the pickup. The front door was open. When I went inside, I could see the back door was open, too, and heard several voices in Zephyrus's bedroom.

"Oh, Holly, there you are!" Maggie exclaimed, as she came into the hall. "Isn't it wonderful? Jimmy and Zack have come to help get rid of the cat odors. We've been doing smell tests."

Two tall young men followed her out and she introduced them to me. Jimmy was muscular, with wavy blond hair, a happy smile, and wore the denim overalls which were typical of Adriana. Zack had dark brown hair that flopped over his forehead, and wore tight jeans and a tee that emphasized his movie star handsomeness. I thought he looked familiar but couldn't remember where I might have seen him before.

"We live next door," said Jimmy, "on the north side of Zephyrus's property."

"Oh!" I said. "Of course! I've seen your *Garden Guys* sign."

"We do landscaping," Jimmy said. "But Zack is a chef, too, and he pinch-hits for other chefs when we're not busy planting things."

"That's where I've seen you! At the Apple Tree restaurant in Mora Bay."

Zack nodded. "It's kinda fun to go flip burgers for a change."

Having been to the Apple Tree a good many times and listened to Ben moaning about the fancy menu prices, I knew that flipping burgers was not Zack's main duty there. Sprinkling purple pansy blooms on complicated desserts was more like it. "What's this about smell tests?" I asked.

Zephyrus, leaning against the door jamb, said, "I told them that Little Cat only ever peed on the couch, so they took it outside, and we opened the doors to let the breeze blow through."

"And then," Maggie said, "we went all through the house, sniffing for cat pee."

"We didn't find any," Zack said, "except from the litter box in the bathroom. And I have a very sensitive nose, so I think Zeph is right about Little Cat."

"And, what we're going to do," added Jimmy, "is load that couch into the truck and take it to the dump."

"That is wonderful," I said. "Because I've been talking to Jerry, the vet, and cleaning that piece of furniture would take weeks and weeks and a lot of hard work."

"Yes," protested Zephyrus, "but what am I going to do without a couch?"

Jimmy grinned. "You mean what are the cats going to do without it! I've never seen you sit on it."

"But you do sometimes," Zephyrus snapped.

"Never you mind," said Jimmy, patting her shoulder. "On the way back, we'll stop at the thrift store and buy you a new old one."

"But I don't have the money to pay you!" she said.

He gave her another pat. "We'll put it on the bill."

Zephyrus snorted. "That's what you always say."

"Well," Jimmy said, "if you'd let me take that old Chevy away, we'd be more than square. You know I want to restore it. I could make a bundle on an antique car like that if I got it into shape."

"Well, you can't," Zephyrus said. "Some of the cats live in that car and I don't want them disturbed."

A long, heart-broken yowl sounded from behind the bathroom door.

"Oh, dear," Maggie said. "We locked Percy and Pru in there while we aired the house." She hurried to the back door and closed it. I shut the front door. Zephyrus let the two silky, young, gray cats out of prison, and they marched into the kitchen, ears back and tails switching.

"I'd better give them treats," Zephyrus said. "They're very upset."

Maggie and I followed Jimmy and Zack out the front door and watched while they loaded the couch onto the pickup.

"It's really good of you to do this," Maggie said.

"Not a problem," said Jimmy. "Zeph needs a little looking after and we're glad to do it. She's a good neighbor and she minds her own business."

"Yeah," added Zack, "sometimes we give her a lift into town, or a lift back when she's lugging cat food and litter. The bus doesn't go by here that often."

The two men said goodbye, climbed into the pickup, backed out onto the road, and drove off. Rather than follow Maggie back into the house, I said, "I must go talk to Sybil about her complaint to the Trustees. You know, do my official duty."

"I do know," Maggie said. "Since your visit is 'official' I won't come with you, but I certainly want to hear about it. Especially if you suspect she's capable of poisoning cats."

I walked out to the road, along it for a hundred feet, and up Sybil's pristine driveway. The jonquils were still nodding their yellow heads in military order. They probably wouldn't dare wilt even a tiny bit.

This time Sybil deigned to be at home. She was short, plump, and as perfectly turned out as her garden, in a pink linen dress with a short matching jacket. Her white hair was pulled into a bun at the back of her head, and she wore glasses with pink frames. I felt like telling her that Zephyrus's knee-holed jeans were actually more fashionable, but reminded myself not to start being obnoxious before I'd even heard what she had to say.

"Mrs. Axton, I'm Holly Sutton, one of the island Trustees. I'm here to discuss your complaint about Mrs. Winstanley."

"Why didn't Mr. Kinnear come? He's the head Trustee, isn't he?"

"No, he's not. We're all three of equal rank." Duff would certainly enjoy being called head trustee, though.

Reluctantly, Sybil opened the door wider and said, "I guess you'd better come in then." She led me into a sitting room that was so clean and precisely arranged that I felt as if I sullied it

merely by breathing its air. Sybil gestured me to a chair. "What are you going to do about those filthy cats?"

"We're going to institute a program called TNR, which means 'trap, neuter, and return,' as recommended by the SPCA. Which means that we will be trapping the cats, a few at a time, getting them neutered, and returning them to their home."

Sybil glared at me. "But that's ridiculous. Those animals should be destroyed, not pampered."

I knew Sybil was ninety, a couple of years younger than Zephyrus, but she looked older. Her face was wrinkled, and her mouth looked as if it were permanently downturned, making her appear very much like the complaining bitch Duff had described. I decided I'd better try to be conciliatory.

"If the cats are all neutered, there will be no more kittens. Also, there will be no fighting or yowling, because there won't be any urge to mate."

Sybil was still glaring. "But their waste will still be everywhere, stinking the place up."

"Cats bury their waste so that you can't smell it," I said. "Biologists say it's probably to keep predators from finding them."

Sybil rose from her chair. "Well, that's ridiculous. Those animals are of no use to anyone and they're a nuisance. I can't imagine what Mr. Kinnear was thinking, sending you here. You tell him I want to see him. And it better be soon."

I rose, too. "Or?"

She stared at me for a minute, then shrugged. "Just do as I tell you."

That seemed to be that. I went out and the door slammed behind me. I muttered various comments on Sybil's ancestry and likely proclivities as I walked back to Zephyrus's house.

Maggie and Zephyrus both stopped talking and looked at me as I shut the front door and marched into the living room.

"Well?" Maggie said.

"Sybil wants to commit caticide! I guess that's the word you use when you kill a cat."

"It's not a word at all," Maggie said, "but I get the message."

Zephyrus waved her hand at the kitchen chair beside Maggie's, and I sat down. "So, she still wants to poison my little friends?"

I repeated my conversation with Sybil. That report was greeted with silence and rueful looks. After all, what could they say?

"How do you think Duff will react?" Maggie asked.

"He's got an excellent vocabulary."

"He'll need it," Zephyrus said. "Would you like some tea?"

When she came back with the mug of strong brew for me, I decided to do a little verbal exploring. Even if Maggie had already done that, it wouldn't hurt to start again. "Zephyrus," I said, "you said you couldn't afford to buy a new couch. I can understand why you're short of money. It must be tough trying to feed the cats and run a house on just the old age pension and military pension."

She stared at me. "What military pension?"

I stared back. "You were in the Air Force, weren't you?"

"Yes," Zephyrus said, "of course I was. I joined up in 1943, and got out in 1953, when I married Abel."

"Then you're entitled to a military pension," I said. "Didn't you apply when you got out of the service?"

Zephyrus smiled. "I was young, and very much in love with Abel. I don't suppose I even thought about a pension. It would have been small, and he and I were sure we'd conquer the world all on our own." She looked around and sighed. "Our world eventually shrank to these five acres, but we had a good life together."

"With your permission," I said, "I'd like to ask my husband to look into the possibility of you getting a pension. All the back pension, too. Ben was in the military for several years. He'll know how to go about it, who to contact."

"You go right ahead," said Zephyrus. "Those cats cost a lot to feed. I can't honestly believe that I'll get a pension, but if I do, I'll pay those boys for what they do for me. And for the vet fees, too."

"Speaking of vet fees," I said, "I'm getting the Trustees to apply for a grant from the SPCA. Assuming we get it, I don't suppose it'll pay for everything, but it'll help."

Zephyrus was looking stunned again. "Perhaps I should go over to Sybil's and thank her for complaining! You two girls are amazing."

"We can't do it all on our own," I said. I went to the kitchen and put my mug in the sink. "I'll need your discharge papers or whatever identification you had in the military."

While Zephyrus was digging through her small metal box of important papers, Maggie reported that she'd explained to Zephyrus all the steps necessary for doing the TNR routine and that we'd be starting within days.

"If we can get some volunteers."

"Don't you worry," said Maggie. "I'll find volunteers."

Zephyrus handed me a sheaf of yellowed papers. "Take good care of these. They hold a lot of memories."

I promised that I would, and Maggie and I said goodbye. We were just walking down the front steps when *The Garden Guys* pickup stopped in the driveway. There was a couch in the back. We walked over and lifted the plastic which covered it.

"Checking the color?" Zack asked, with a smile.

I shook my head. "Smell test!"

Maggie and I leaned over the side and sniffed. I gave the boys a thumbs-up and we walked out to the Jeep.

As we were nearing Caroline's driveway, I said, "We should stop in and see how she's getting on."

"Too soon!" exclaimed Maggie. "Much too soon! Give April time to convert her to a cat person. Then we won't have to find another home for our calico."

Dealing with the ferals seemed like enough of a project for the next few weeks or months or whatever it took, but we'd assumed responsibility for April, so we had to complete that project, too. I said as much to Maggie.

She chuckled. "Oh, let's not look at it as a project. Let's think of it as something fun." A pause. Then Maggie laughed. "Got it! We'll call it the Calico Cat Caper."



Chapter 4 ~ Stalking Cats

We arrived back at Holly Haven a few minutes before lunch. Maggie refused my offer of soup and a sandwich, saying she already had food prepared, and headed off along the path skirting Ben's garden toward her house. I fed Nicky and BJ their treats and BJ galloped after Maggie, no doubt hoping for more from her. Nicky followed me into the house, and I marveled anew at how accurately cats and dogs can tell time. Naturally, I ended up navigating around a dog and six cats in my own kitchen, all of them eager to participate in the noon meal, while I put soup on to heat for Ben and me.

When he came in, I told him the morning's news, including the fact that I'd taken Little Cat to be examined by Jerry.

Ben looked up from his shrimp soup. "You took her in? But Zephyrus will be paying his fees, won't she?"

"Um, no. I'll have to do that."

He put his spoon down. "Why?"

"Because she has no money, and that cat needs to be looked after."

"My budget doesn't allow for paying other people's bills!"

"We'll get the money back, but it might take a while." I reminded him that the Trustees were going to apply for a grant from the SPCA. Then I told him that Zephyrus had been in the Air Force for ten years and had never gotten any pension.

Ben was working on his sandwich now. "Well, that's ridiculous. She should certainly be getting a pension."

"I thought you could help get it for her," I said. "I brought her discharge papers and some other documents home with me. You'll know who to contact in Veteran's Affairs and how to do it, right? And the sooner it's done, the sooner Zephyrus will have the money to pay us back for the vet fees."

For a moment, Ben was silent, and I wondered if he was annoyed. But the St. Francis part of his personality took over and he merely sighed. "You know how busy I am in the garden. But the lady obviously needs help."

I reminded him that I had to take fast action about the feral cats, or else the entire island would soon be wading ankle-deep in felines.

"You're exaggerating."

"No, really. Ask Jerry; he'll tell you."

"It's too bad the Trustees don't have a slush fund for things like this."

"I suppose we could apply to the Provincial Government for one, but I'm fairly sure they'd say no." Ben didn't react, so I went on to explain that the neighbors who had dealt with Zephyrus's stinky couch were *The Garden Guys*.

He stopped halfway through lifting the last piece of sandwich to his mouth, and Nicky rose on his hind legs and gently relieved him of it. "I know Jimmy and Zach," he said, and turned to Nicky. "I saw that!"

"They appear to be very nice young men," I said.

Ben nodded. "They are. I've stopped in there a couple of times, looking for something. Usually advice." He rose and fetched the coffee pot. "They have an almost new modular home. They asked me in once, for coffee. The place was shipshape."

"This place would be shipshape, too, if we didn't have six cats and a dog."

Ben poured coffee and put the pot back on the stove. When he sat down again, Nicky put his chin on Ben's knee and gazed up at him adoringly. Which earned him a gentle ear scratch and, of course, sympathy. "Poor Nicky! Is Holly bad-mouthing you and your little friends again? You can't help shedding hair, can you? Poor little guy!"

I let it pass. If Ben was sympathizing with Nicky over my terrible treatment of that spoiled bundle of white fur, then he wasn't upset over my ruining his April budget. I sipped coffee while Ben told me what he'd done in the garden all morning, and what he planned to do all afternoon.

I'd planned to go see Maggie right away and get on with organizing the feral cat rescue team. But I knew she had recently begun having a nap after lunch, so I decided to leave her in peace. Instead, I walked out to the road and down a couple of hundred yards to visit Caroline. I felt guilty that we'd dumped April on the woman without even asking, and I wanted to apologize.

She opened the door, recognized me, and said, "You haven't come to get April, have you?"

Did she mean that the way it sounded? I managed to get my tongue in working order and said, "No, I came to..."

"Because I'm not ready to give her up yet. She's a fascinating little creature!" Caroline turned and headed down the hall. She hadn't closed the door in my face, so I assumed she intended me to follow her, which I did.

In the living room, Caroline ran a hand through her short, wavy gray hair and sat on one end of her couch. April was stretched out on the other end, as dignified as a queen. I sat down across from them, in a soft, cozy chair.

"Are you getting on together all right?" I asked cautiously.

Caroline's sharp blue eyes sparkled. "Do you know that this animal can shake a paw?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I had no idea animals could do that. I mean, I've heard stories about such things, but I thought it was fanciful nonsense. So I tried it, just to prove a point. I held out my hand and said, 'Shake a paw,' and she did!"

"I hope you gave her a treat. She would have expected one."

"Of course! And, do you know, she talks?"

I knew, only too well. All my cats were talkers. Siamese have a reputation for being gabby, but I'd long since concluded that all cats will talk if their humans take time to interact with them. "What did she say?" I asked, half in jest, but Caroline took the question seriously.

"She used her litter box and then came and told me it needed cleaning."

"How do you know that's what she said?"

Caroline smiled triumphantly. "Because I cleaned it, and she started purring."

I looked at April in reverent admiration. This cat knew what she was doing. "Has she sat in your lap yet?"

"Oh, no! I wouldn't allow that. I'm merely taking this opportunity to make some observations."

That did not sound hopeful. "I came to tell you that the people I'd hoped would take her can't do it. I hope you're willing to keep her for a few more days."

"Oh, that will probably be enough," said Caroline. "Do you know what else she likes? I gave her water in a little dish on the floor, but she seems to prefer licking it off the edge of the bathroom sink."

"Very clever." But that remark reminded me of something I'd been curious about lately.

"Sorry to be nosy, but what did you teach in college?"

"Quantum mechanics."

I gulped. That was what some people might call too much information. "I have what I think

is a scientific question, which I hoped you could answer."

"I'm a physicist," Caroline said. "I don't know much about animals, but physics covers much of the other scientific territory."

"Okay." I leaned forward. "This may be a silly question, but I've been wondering about water. If I splash a few drops on the edge of the bathroom sink, a few minutes later it's become one big drop. Why does it do that?"

"Surface tension." Caroline looked at my expression and said, "I see you want a bit more explanation. Each water molecule consists of a larger oxygen atom and two smaller hydrogen atoms. The oxygen sits in the middle with the two hydrogen atoms stuck to it on either side. But while the oxygen is strongly attracted to its own two hydrogen atoms, it's also flirting with any others that are close by."

"Ah! The power of romance!"

"If you choose to regard it that way," Caroline said. "Therefore, the oxygen is constantly tugging on the hydrogen from other water molecules. That's what holds water together. It's called hydrogen bonding, and it's very strong. In a pool of water, water molecules are constantly pulling on the other water molecules around them, tugging the whole mass of water together. They're far more attracted to each other than they are to the porcelain surface of a sink. Which is why your scattered drops become one big one. And that's called surface tension."

"I thought gravity would keep the water flattened out."

Caroline shook her head. "The world of the small is different from the world of the big, which is what we normally see. Gravity and inertia are forces that control us, but they're much less effective at the atomic level. As a quantum physicist, that's what I deal with: molecules, atoms, and the tinier components of those."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm as fascinated by knowledge like this as you are by April."

"I'll give you another example of the power of surface tension." Caroline was smiling a little, and I decided I'd accidentally discovered the key to her heart.

"Water molecules," she said, "are nearly as attracted to cotton fibers as they are to each other. That's why, if you dip the corner of a cotton towel into water, the water molecules will slowly creep up the surfaces of each fiber. Since the water molecules are so strongly attracted to each other, the first one to touch the towel can't crawl upwards by itself but must bring the next water molecule with it. This process only stops when the weight of the water is exactly balanced by the upward pull of the surface tension. In other words, gravity takes effect."

"The same thing happens with paper towels."

Caroline nodded. "Water molecules are also attracted to wood fiber. That, and surface tension, are what allows giant redwoods to suck water up hundreds of feet to their top leaves."

April stood up in one fluid feline motion, jumped off the couch, and marched purposefully toward the kitchen.

Caroline rose, too. "I must go see what she does next."

"Good luck with your observations," I said. "I'll bring some peacock feathers and catnip mice next time I come. Then you can find out if she likes playing."

Caroline didn't answer and I decided I might as well go home. I said loudly, "See you soon!" and let myself out the front door.

I had come to Caroline's house feeling sorry for April because she'd lost the only home she'd known in her fourteen years of life. Now, on leaving, I was feeling sorry for her again because it looked like she was going to lose this new home, too. It also looked as though Caroline was simply interested in the scientific examination of feline life. Then I began feeling sorry for

myself because now I'd have to spend a lot of time trying to find another home for April. The calico cat caper was expanding into something bigger than I had anticipated.



Some time later, I arrived at Maggie's house, and we settled down at the kitchen table with notebooks and pens to plan our strategy, aided by coffee and a plate of peanut butter cookies. Doran and Shaz were napping in a sunny patch on the living room floor and Pete perched in his cage, blinking sleepily.

We decided to split the job of phoning for volunteers. "We can't ask Ben," I said, doodling on my note pad. "He's too busy with the garden. And he's agreed to look after Zephyrus's pension application."

"And we can't ask Cal," Maggie said, "because he's busy shearing his Angora goats and washing the wool."

"That won't take him forever, though. Maybe he'd be willing to help once that job is done."

Maggie looked doubtful. "I hope so, but he's planning to weave a big wall hanging to enter in the fall fair."

"Well, we can't interrupt an artist at his work," I said. Cal had won several prizes for his weaving and sold all his pieces. A month ago, I'd heard him bragging to Ben that he even had a waiting list.

Having disposed of our nearest and dearest, we moved on to friends. I started my list with Shelly Norton, who had adopted two of Kaylie's kittens to keep her old cat, Twitchit, company. "She's a bookkeeper," I said to Maggie. "She could be the treasurer of our rescue fund."

Maggie leaned back. "That's right! We'll have money, won't we? Therefore, we need to have a society and it must have a name. What shall we call it?"

Naturally, my mind went blank. Finally, I dredged one up. "Macklin Cat Rescue."

"No, that won't do," Maggie said. "Suppose another colony starts up somewhere else on the island? What about Zephyrus Cat Rescue? She started all this."

The budgie suddenly landed on her shoulder. "Shut up!" he said.

"Pete," Maggie said, "you are a very rude little bird."

He stroked her cheek with his beak, and chirped, "Go to hell!"

Maggie rose and went to the cupboard. "All right, you can have a treat." She gave him a small lump of something, and he flew back to his cage with it.

"Zephyrus is too personal," I said. "And anyway, nobody will know how to spell it. And if we get too cute with names, nobody will know what the society does. Why don't we just go with something boring but descriptive, like Adriana Cat Rescue?"

Maggie thought about that for a minute or two. "I agree. Anyway, it's the thought that counts, isn't it?"

We agreed that our next columns for the *Adriana Advocate* would be about the cat colony and the urgency of getting all the cats neutered. Maggie's column was called *Looking For Love*, basically ads for cats the SPCA had ready for adoption, written from each cat's point of view. Maggie had a knack for making them quite sexy. I wrote a column called *Tidelines*, consisting of news 'bites' from all around the island.

"I'll announce the formation of the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society* and put both our phone numbers in it," I said. "I guess we can say to leave donations at the Advocate. I'm sure Scott will be okay with that."

We finished our lists of people to phone about volunteering to stalk and capture cats. "Here's what we'll have to tell everybody," I said. "Sunset will be the best time to set traps, because Zephyrus feeds them at dusk. Also, we can't set traps in the rain or leave them out in the heat of day unless we cover them with something."

"So," Maggie said, "generally speaking, we'll be setting out traps at dusk. Then what? Collect them in the morning?"

"According to what I've read, we should wait around for about an hour and then collect them. But I guess if no cats have gone into the traps by then, we should leave them overnight."

"If we pick them up the same evening, we have to put the traps somewhere overnight, before we take them to Jerry's clinic." Maggie looked thoughtful. "An empty garage would be ideal, and we could cover the floor with plastic sheets. Any ideas on where?"

"I'll ask Jerry. The building his clinic is in was actually a house once. There might be a garage in the back, or a shed, or something. If it comes down to using our carport, I'll have to persuade Ben to leave Bouncing Blue Betsy out in the rain." That carport was getting to be like Zephyrus's garage; it was so full of junk that my Jeep had to live outside.

"This gets more complicated all the time," Maggie said. "We'll have to warn Zephyrus not to feed them on the days we pick for trapping, and most important, phone Jerry for an appointment for the following morning."

"Jerry's the most important part of this plan," I said, "which means I'd better call him first to make an appointment. Do we dare pick this coming Sunday night for the first capture?"

"That's pushing it," Maggie said. "But I can tell the people I'm phoning that it might be that soon."

"Okay. I'll phone Jerry as soon as I get home, and let you know." I ate the last bite of the cookie I'd been working on for a while. "I did go visit Caroline after lunch, and she's absolutely fascinated with April."

Maggie looked delighted. "Oh, that's wonderful! That means we don't have to phone around and see if we can find another home for the cat."

"Well, don't speak too soon," I said. "She's a scientist. She seems to be spending a lot of time observing April and I suspect she's just enjoying a new experiment."

"Holly, you worry too much! If April has Caroline mesmerized, I'm sure it'll be permanent. Cats aren't stupid, you know."

"I'd better start phoning, though. I hate to think of April being homeless."

Maggie shook her head. "Leave it for a few days. April may be able to hook Caroline permanently."

I said I'd try not to worry, and went home to my own house of flying fur. I'd planned to call Jerry first, but he beat me to it.

"Holly," he said, "I wanted to let you know that Little Cat has a severe bladder infection. It's been let go far too long, but she could make it."

"Oh, that's a relief!" I struggled to hang on to the phone while George the Magnificent tried to tug the cord away from me, assuming I must be talking to him, since no other cats or humans were in sight. This was my own fault, of course. I should long since have bought a cell phone or, at least, a cordless phone. My only excuse was that I didn't like technology all that much and didn't want to be bothered learning how to use it.

"I'm going to keep her here for a few days," Jerry said, "and monitor how she reacts to the antivirus. Did you do anything about the smell of cat urine in Zephyrus's house?"

I brought him up to date on the removal of the old, stinky couch and all the smell tests of the

house that five humans had done.

"Good! But use a citrus spray, just in case. Anywhere you think it might be needed. Mrs. Winstanley told me the cat tended to be clingy and needy, but I'm sure now that was the result of her illness. She would have been in pain for some time, and clinging to humans in hope that they could fix it."

"That makes sense. And, Jerry, I have a question. Two questions, actually. Would this coming Monday be too early for us to bring in some ferals for neutering?"

"Whoa! You're moving fast!"

"Well, you told me to."

"In that case, I'll be ready for you at eight. I have a couple of clinic appointments, but I can put them off until the afternoon. And I'll give you a deal. The first half dozen cats will be half price, to get you started."

"Jerry, I appreciate that more than I can express. You're the key player in this effort, you know."

"No, I'm not. If your volunteers aren't out there stalking felines, there's nothing I could do."

"Thanks! Bill everything to the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society*. I'll be paying the bills until we get money from the SPCA and donations, or until Ben kills me because I've wrecked his budget for the entire year."

Jerry laughed. Everybody on Adriana knew about Ben's obsession with his budgets, weekly, monthly, and yearly.

"My other question is about where to keep the traps overnight, since we're planning on putting them out at sunset and, with luck, picking them up an hour or two later. We need a sheltered space and if there's nowhere else, I can possibly squeeze them in my carport."

"No need," Jerry said. "There's an old garage behind my office. Put the cages in there and close the door so that wandering dogs or raccoons don't get in and disturb my new patients. When I get to work, I can take the traps straight in. Much better for the cats than getting freaked out with another road trip."

"That's perfect! And takes a load off my mind." I thanked him, said goodbye, and hung up.

I took a few minutes off then, to cuddle George, my semi-Siamese ruler. His dark tabby fur, vibrating with purrs, felt soft under my hand, and I gradually regained a sense of peace and contentment with my world while I listened to his healing rumble. I rose from my chair beside the phone and headed toward the couch, anticipating a twenty-minute nap with a purring king. However, since George hadn't thought of the idea first, he jumped out of my arms and marched off on other business. I looked at the couch and then the phone, sighed, and gave in to duty.

First, I called Maggie to tell her we'd be setting traps Sunday night. Then I called Zephyrus to tell her about Little Cat, and explain that she wasn't to feed the cats Sunday night because we were going to set out traps. It took me some little time to convince her that the feral cats wouldn't be hurt. The next most urgent call was to Duff.

"You need to go visit Sybil Axton and exercise your manly wiles on her, Duff."

"What?" He sounded confused.

"I saw her yesterday and she wants to talk to you. She has the idea that you're head trustee and she's not willing to deal with second raters."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Duff said, obviously exasperated.

"No, really! She was quite upset that you'd sent me to do the talking and she was disgusted with the idea of neutering the ferals. She says they should be destroyed. So go soothe her with a whiff of testosterone."

"All right," he grumbled.

"And do you have time for a quick coffee tomorrow morning? We need to sign an application to the SPCA for a grant to help us deal with those feral cats."

"Does Melody think we'll get it?"

"She's pretty sure we will."

"Good!" Duff said. "A grant would be a big help. I'll see you at the coffee shop, usual time."

"Okay." Afterward, I'd take the application to Melody and pick up the four cat traps she promised to loan me.

The next phone call was to Shelly Norton. She was horrified about the size of the colony of ferals, but delighted that the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society* was going to do something about the problem. "I have another commitment for Sunday night," she said, "but I can kick in some cash."

"There'll be other opportunities to go trapping," I said. "You won't miss out on all the fun. Jerry can only handle so many at a time. And you don't need to donate, because Maggie and I have decided you're the perfect person to be treasurer of the society."

A silence at the other end of the line had me worried for a minute, but Shelly came through. "Oh, all right," she said. "It's what I do for a living, after all."

"Which means you can probably handle it during your coffee breaks," I said, full of encouragement. "Maggie doesn't know it yet but she's going to be president. She's got the right personality to deal with people. And she writes about cats every week."

Shelly laughed. "Yes, she'll be perfect, and not because of her personality. She's little and old, and she's got white hair, so she looks as though she might break if you touched her. Who could be hard-hearted enough to say no to someone like that?"

"All true except about her being breakable. I hope nobody she talks to has noticed her riding around the island on the back of a motorbike."

We chatted a few minutes longer, about her three cats and my six, and caught up on the latest gossip. This, of course, was the reason that it took forever to accomplish anything on the island. We all had to catch up on the news, whatever it was.

When I'd finished my lengthy phone calls, I went upstairs to the storage closet where Ben and I put things in case they came in handy someday. I lucked in on three small, tattered couch throws. We needed these to protect the traps in case it rained but, most of all, to completely cover traps with wild cats inside. If they couldn't see what was happening, they'd remain relatively calm.

That done, I decided that perhaps it would be nice of me to make supper for Ben, who was still slaving in the greenhouse. I hauled one of my home-made beef and onion pizzas out of the freezer, then phoned Maggie to invite her and Cal over for dinner. We were overdue for a celebration.



"What are we celebrating?" Ben demanded, as the four of us settled, drinks in hand, in the living room while we waited for dinner to heat.

"Our cat caper," Maggie said, coaxing Kaylie to sit in her lap.

"The fact that Jerry will do the first six neutering jobs for half price," I said.

"Always good to save a few pennies," Cal contributed.

Ben snorted. "A penny saved isn't much."

It looked like I'd be the one getting the second round of drinks if the animal population

decided to stay where it was. Ben had Ming in his lap, Poppy on his shoulder, and Nicky sprawled across his feet. George sat on one arm of my chair, with his disciple, Cato, on the other arm. Caesar had chosen to go to sleep on Cal.

"I like that cat caper idea," I said. "Maybe we should call the society the Adriana Cat Caper."

"Cat Capture," said Cal, always practical.

"Leave it alone," Maggie said. "As you so rightly said, Adriana Cat Rescue says exactly what it is."

"Doing the first trapping Sunday night, eh?" Ben shifted slightly, and Ming sat up, complained softly, and did a couple of circles before lying down again. "What if these cats have diseases?"

"Jerry will take care of them," Cal said. "Cure them or euthanize them, whichever he thinks is kindest."

"I wonder if veterinarians have used pot on animals," Maggie said.

"Certainly not!" Ben exclaimed. "It's illegal."

"Benjamin," his mother said, "pot can't possibly be illegal if it's relieving pain. I tried it with Blue Eyes and Smoke, and I'm sure it helped."

"Mother!" Ben sat up straight, dislodging both Ming and Poppy. "You didn't!"

"I'm only teasing you," she said, "but I did consider it. And I might very well use it if Doran or Shaz gets sick."

"Not if I have anything to do with it," Ben muttered. The two cats had climbed back onto him; they were used to his brief explosions.

Cal, also used to Ben's eruptions, decided to change the subject. "You remember I told you about my sister, Eva, in Vancouver? Well, she had her granddaughter to stay overnight last week. She phoned to tell me that the kid slept with her and next morning she asked if Eva knew she purred in her sleep."

"Ben purrs in his sleep, too," I said. "Sometimes quite loudly."

"I do not," he said.

"I guess we all do," Cal said. "Part of getting older, some would say."

Maggie retorted sharply, "I don't need anyone to remind me that I'm getting older. I have a bladder that does that for me."

Cal looked slightly guilty. "Uh, Holly, maybe we could all do with another drink."

I got up and collected the empty glasses, hoping the subject would have changed by the time I came back.



Chapter 5 ~ Trapping Cats

Friday morning at ten, I met Duff in Trudy's Cafe, the little coffee shop across the mall from his grocery store. While we waited for our coffee and Trudy's sinfully delicious double chocolate chunk muffins, Duff read the SPCA grant application.

"Looks good," he said, and added his unreadable flourish of a signature. "Now, what's all this about Sybil Axton?"

"I don't think she likes women."

"Still smarting over Zephyrus stealing her boyfriend, maybe."

"After nearly sixty years?" The coffee and muffins arrived, and I gratefully inhaled the coffee aroma.

"Some women are like that."

"And some women," I said, "believe that only men are powerful enough to make things happen and they want to see if they can wield enough female attraction to bend a powerful man to their will."

"Stop it, Holly. You're scaring me." Duff bit into his muffin. "These are so good! I can't resist them."

His waistline was a testament to that. Fortunately, mine wasn't. Yet. "There's nothing to worry about. Unless you're afraid you won't be able to resist ninety-year-old eyelashes batting at you."

He laughed, spewing a few muffin crumbs on the table. "I'm immune to eyelashes of any age. Okay, I'll flirt with her a little and sympathize with her a lot, and manfully confess that I was outvoted by the other two trustees. Do you suppose that'll keep her quiet?"

"I don't know. She sounded all too serious about getting those cats destroyed."

Duff said, "It is a fact, and I can prove it, that a cat has thirty-two muscles in each ear. Perhaps Sybil has that many in her tongue."

"I hope she's merely exercising them."

"Actually," Duff said, "the strongest muscle in the human body is the tongue."

"Perfect for killing chocolate muffins." I ate more of mine. "Maggie and I have decided to call the cat organization the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society*. She's president, though I haven't told her yet, and Shelly Norton is treasurer. You'll be the vice-president. I suppose that means I'll be the secretary."

"Aren't you supposed to have elections?"

"I did. I asked myself who were the best choices and I made them." Then I went on to tell him that the first Operation Cat Trap was scheduled for Sunday night and Jerry would do the operations Monday morning.

"You'll need cat food for bait," Duff said. "Come back to the store with me and I'll donate some. Canned mackerel or sardines would be good. Also, tuna cat food."

"Perfect! Give me a cash register tape and I'll make sure you get a donation receipt."

Duff smiled. "Aren't you somewhat ahead of yourself? We haven't even legally formed a society yet, or got a tax number to make the donations tax deductible."

"I'm going over to the Advocate office and get them to start a list of who donates what for the society. You'll be the first one on it. Then I'll phone Shelly and ask her to get going on the paperwork for the society."

"It is a proven fact that the sloth, which is a rather peculiar mammal, moves so slowly that

green algae can grow undisturbed on its fur," Duff said. "You, Holly, are the opposite of that sloth."

"Thank you. I think."

We walked over to Duff's store, and I collected a shopping bag full of what I hoped was appropriately smelly cat food. Then delivered the grant application to Melody at the SPCA and picked up the four cat traps she'd promised me. After I'd loaded them into the back of the Jeep, I decided four weren't enough. The more cats we could trap each time, the faster we'd get the problem solved. At the pet store, I bought the last two they had in stock and was forced to accept that six would have to be enough. I consoled myself with the thought that Jerry probably wouldn't want to deal with more than six cats at a time.

The next stop was at Shelly's home office to arrange for her to open a bank account as well as do the paperwork to set up the society. And buy a receipt book.

"You do realize, I hope," said Shelly, "that we'll be in full operation before we're even close to being legal."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

Shelly laughed. "Holly, Ben was right when he told me that you worry too much. Everything will be fine."

"I hope so. What I'm really worried about is that we'll put these traps out, and not catch any cats." Then I realized what I'd said. "Sorry, I can't help it."

"Worrying is a waste of energy," Shelly said. "If you don't catch any cats this time, you will the next time. The important thing is that you're trying. And learning."

"Chasing rainbows," I said. "Well, chasing cats, though I don't like to think of it that way. How are the babies?"

"Fine, but I'm going to chase you out of my office. I've got a client arriving in five minutes. You'll have to postpone a visit with the cats until next time."

I drove toward the east side of the island and home. But the day was sunny, I was restless, and I didn't want to go home yet. I wanted to do more about Zephyrus's cat colony. By the time I was halfway across the hilly backbone of the island, I realized there wasn't anything else I could do. Unless it was talking to more people.

A few minutes later, I parked in Caroline's driveway.

"You're back again?" she asked when she opened the door and saw me. "You're not worried about April, are you?"

"No. You seem to be doing very well by her. But I wanted to tell you about the cat rescue society and also answer any questions you might have about cats. That is, if you have time. Or questions. Or I could simply stop worrying about the feral cat colony I have to deal with and go home and dust something."

Caroline smiled and opened the door wider. "Come in, and this time I'll make you a cup of coffee. You sound like you need one."

We took our coffees into the living room, which had a glorious view of the Strait and the little islands dotting the sparkling blue water. April was sleeping in a corner chair. She glanced up, but I ignored her, and she put her head back down on her paws.

"Do you still find her interesting to watch?"

"Yes," Caroline said, with a smile. But I do have a question. What was it you rescued her from?"

"A house with several other cats. April is a loner, and she had the house and the owner to herself for the first thirteen years of her life. Then the owner, Zephyrus, began taming and

adopting feral cats from the colony on her property. April either retreated into hidden corners or hissed and spat at the other cats."

"No wonder we get on," Caroline said. "I can empathize with her, because I'm a loner, too. I moved to this island for two reasons. One was to get away from the buzzing hive of the city, and the other was to have a place to hike on my own. The central part of this island is wild, and I've found some good trails."

"And how is that working? I mean, other than me crashing in on you all the time."

"Oh, I'll tell you if it becomes too much," Caroline smiled. "I'm happy to have good neighbors. I was told that you're involved in the island's political life, so I doubt you have much time available for casual visits. And I don't do casual chit-chat."

"You're right." I told her about my life as a trustee, and about Zephyrus and her feral cat colony being the reason I'd come across April. Then gave her a quick summary of what the trustees were doing about the colony.

"That interests me," said Caroline. "I'd be willing to donate some time. I'd like to see how a feral colony works."

"Would you be interested in fostering cats or kittens?" I'd belatedly realized that this could be a major problem.

"No, definitely not."

"Sorry, I shouldn't even have asked. I can't do it, either, since the feline political situation with my six cats is delicately balanced. Maggie, my mother-in-law, has two cats, a bird, and a dog, and their lives are dominated by Doran, who is a gorgeous cat with a great personality, but he's also a bully. It's his way or the highway."

"Surely there's something else I can do," Caroline said.

"What about helping Zephyrus feed the cats? I could take you to her place and introduce you. She's ninety-two and will need help sooner rather than later. Also, feeding them would be a way of observing the life of the colony. I guess I'm safe in saying that Zephyrus is pretty much of a loner, too."

Caroline smiled. "That would suit me. Science is about observing and experimenting. It's not just about collecting facts, you know; it's a logical process for working things out."

"You make it sound simple."

"As a matter of fact, it is. Critical thinking is the key. And we already do that in our daily lives, what with advertisers and politicians all telling us that they know best. We need to be able to look at the evidence and work out whether or not we agree with them." Caroline put her mug down on an end table. "Of course, if you want to exercise logic on molecules and atoms, you have to first earn at least a couple of degrees, so that you understand what you're looking at."

"I'd like to learn more about science, and I've been considering taking online courses," I said, "but right now I don't have much time. Which brings me back to the feral cats. How about coming with me on Sunday night for the first trapping, and meet Zephyrus then?"

"What time?"

"I'll pick you up about eight."

Caroline agreed but, when I rose, said, "I do have some questions about April."

I sat down again, happy to get away from the subject of ferals for a while. Talking about them was easy; capturing them was going to be hard.

"I bought her some dry chicken treats," Caroline said, "and she loves those. But she won't eat the wet food. She'll only lick up the gravy. Why is that?"

"Just a personality quirk, probably," I said. "Cats do have different personalities, the same as

humans. And I meant to bring a peacock feather and a catnip mouse, but I forgot. She might like those as toys, and might not. Some cats aren't affected at all by catnip. And you should get some dry food for her."

"What does it mean when her tail twitches at the tip?"

"She must be happy here. Tail twitching means she's feeling blissful. If she rolls over and exposes her tummy, and especially if she lets you touch it, that means she trusts you. Cats are most vulnerable when sleeping, so if she sleeps on you, that's a big compliment, too."

"Hm," Caroline said. "I've actually had the urge to pet her tummy; it looks so soft. She purrs a lot and that's a lovely sound. Does that also mean she's happy?"

"Usually. Purring lowers her heart rate, and helps her to relax. But cats also purr to heal themselves. I've heard cats purr when they're in pain, and in that case, it certainly doesn't mean they're happy."

"Interesting!" Caroline paused. "It feels rather odd to be this involved with a cat. I've mostly been involved with my work and, to a lesser extent, with other people."

"Well, the DNA of a cat is more than 90 percent the same as ours," I said. "They're shaped differently, and they have different abilities, but they are, in fact, a lot like us. So, there's nothing strange about becoming friends with one. Or with a dog. Or with any other animal, of course. Last year, the cat who used to hang out in the used bookstore in Mora Bay died, and the owner put an obit in the local paper. I never heard any comments about that being odd."

Caroline looked thoughtful. "I knew that, about the DNA, I mean, but hadn't really given it any thought. I will, though."

Getting ready once more to leave, I remember my neighborly duties. "By the way, Ben and I raise chickens as well as fresh vegetables, so if you need eggs, you can get them from us."

"I'll remember that," Caroline said. "Would you like a short scientific snippet about eggs?"

"I'd love it!"

"All right. Fresh eggs are denser than water, which means they will sink and lie flat in cold water. But, if they sit in your fridge for a few days, they gradually dry out. As water sneaks out of the shell, air molecules sneak into an air sac at the rounded end to fill the gap."

"Well, I know other food dries out in the fridge. I didn't realize that eggs do, too. I thought the shell would protect them from that."

"An egg that's a week old will sink to the bottom, but it will stand up on the pointy end, rather than lie flat," Caroline said. "This is because the additional air, being lighter than the contents of the egg and lighter than the water, naturally floats closer to the surface. And if the egg floats completely, it's been around a bit too long."

"Thanks! Now I know how to test for freshness." I paused. "Science is very practical, isn't it? Does it have the answer for how to distinguish a raw egg from a boiled egg without taking their shells off?"

"I take it you hard-boil eggs and stick them back in the fridge with the raw ones."

"No, but my husband does. Ben insists that boiled eggs should go back in the carton, so they don't roll around and possibly fall out onto the floor. Sometimes he remembers to mark them with a pencil, but sometimes he doesn't."

"There's an easy way to do it. Set the egg spinning on a smooth, hard surface. The kitchen countertop would be fine. After a few seconds, give the egg a quick touch with one finger, just enough to stop the rotation. If the egg stays stationary, it's cooked. But if it slowly starts to spin again after a second or two, then it's raw."

"Magic!"

Caroline shook her head. "No, science. Raw and boiled eggs look identical, but their insides are different and that gives the secret away. If you touch a cooked egg, you're touching a whole, solid object. But if you stop a raw egg, you're merely stopping the shell. The liquid inside it never stopped swirling around, and therefore, after a second or so, the shell starts to rotate again, because it's being dragged around by its insides."

"That's fascinating. And it makes sense."

"Physics generally does," Caroline said. "One of its principles is that objects tend to continue however they're moving unless you push or pull on them. In this case, the total amount of spin of the egg white stays the same because it had no reason to change. This is known as conservation of angular momentum."

"Does that work with anything other than eggs?" I asked.

"Yes, it's the same physical principle used to orient one of the most advanced technologies our civilization has produced, the Hubble Space Telescope."

"Wow! Thank you. I'm going to go home and try that." I rose. "You must have enjoyed teaching."

"I did," said Caroline, "and I have to admit I've missed it since I retired."

"You can practice on me any time," I said. I turned to look at the corner chair. "See you around, April."

She raised her head, yawned widely to show a mouthful of sharp little teeth, and put her head back on her paws. One contented feline.

"You, too, Caroline. About eight Sunday night."

Five minutes later I was in my driveway, giving treats to two eager dogs. Seven minutes later, I was in the kitchen with a carton of eggs on the counter.

Ben came in for lunch at the exact moment I'd started spinning an egg. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded. "If that egg falls on the floor, it'll splatter all over."

"I'm doing a scientific experiment. And if the result is what I believe it will be, and the egg falls on the floor, the dogs will have a treat."

The dogs were watching me, as they always did around noon, with their unfailing sense of time. Ben watched me, too. Finally, he turned to Nicky. "She's lost it, you know. Gone totally bonkers. I guess we'll have to make our own lunch."



It had rained a little early on Sunday morning, but by afternoon, the dampness had disappeared, and by eight o'clock, when I stopped in Caroline's driveway, the sun was sliding down behind the hills from a clear, blue sky. We drove to Zephyrus's house and parked on the side of the road, rather than disturb the colony by using the driveway. Cal had brought Maggie in his pickup, and he parked behind us. I opened the back of the Jeep and Cal was lifting out the baited cat traps when Zephyrus and Jimmy strolled down the driveway and stopped beside us.

"We decided that the best way of going about this," Jimmy said quietly, "is for Cal and me to carry the traps, with Zephyrus showing us the best places to put them. On the next trapping trip, one of us should be here to show the next person."

Maggie, Caroline, and I watched as the three walked along the driveway and into the trees, placing a cat trap in various places. This took some time, since each trap had to be set on a level space and then covered, except for the trap door, with a small blanket.

I wanted to say something, anything, to stop myself worrying about whether the traps would

work, but decided it made more sense to stay quiet. The less disturbed the cats were, the quicker they'd enter the traps, or so I hoped.

When Zephyrus and her two helpers came back, we piled into my Jeep, but left the windows open, hoping we would be able to hear trap doors slamming shut, and began talking softly.

"I'm glad you're here, Cal," I said. "I thought you were too busy with the angoras to come."

"Never too busy to try something new," Cal said. "Anyhow, I'm still not finished the plan for the wall hanging, and there's no point dyeing wool until that's done."

"Besides," Maggie said, "today turned out to be too early for all the people who said they'd volunteer for the job. They all had other things to do tonight."

From where I sat, I could see Sybil's house. The curtains were closed, but I saw the ones in her kitchen move a little, and I was sure she was watching us. Duff hadn't phoned me, so I didn't know if he'd been to see her or not.

Caroline and Zephyrus were talking about April. I crossed my fingers that the cat would turn Caroline into a loyal slave.

"I'll come back tomorrow if that's all right," Caroline said, "and learn about feeding the cats. That way, I'll know what to do if you decide you want a break. I'm quite curious about how these animals live in the wild."

"They live a lot better with humans feeding them than they would otherwise," said Zephyrus. "It takes some of the pressure off the bird and mouse populations, too."

Click!

"Was that a door shutting?" I whispered.

"I think so," Jimmy replied. "Let's be quiet and see if we hear any more sounds like that one."

The time seemed to drag on forever, but only a few minutes passed until we heard another five clicks.

Jimmy and Cal got out of the Jeep. "We'll go see what's happened," Jimmy said.

I waited, chewing on my bottom lip, but it wasn't long before they came back, each carrying a cat trap which was obviously heavier than when they had carried it into the woods.

"It worked!" said Cal gleefully.

"Are the cats okay?" Zephyrus demanded.

"Fine," Jimmy said. "As long as they can't see, they won't panic." He set the cat trap carefully into the back of the Jeep. Cal did the same, and the two men went back to check the other four traps.

When all six traps were loaded, Zephyrus asked, "Is it okay if I feed the rest of the clan now?"

"I can't think of any reason why not," I said. "Go for it!"

"And I'm away home," Jimmy said. "Zack and I are available if you need us."

"They're good boys," Zephyrus said, as she climbed out of the Jeep. "They've done a lot for me." She walked toward her house and her supply of dry cat food.

I was elated with our first venture, but realized I'd actually been sweating in the cool spring air. So much for unnecessary worrying!

"We'll be waiting for you at Jerry's office," Maggie said. She and Cal climbed into the pickup and headed toward Mora Bay.

Twenty minutes later Caroline and I pulled in behind them. The four of us carried the cat traps around to the back of the building and put them inside the old garage Jerry had said we could use. They weren't easy to carry. The cats might not be hissing or growling, but they were

moving around, which made it hard to keep the cage level and steady. We closed the garage door and walked back to our vehicles.

"Whew! I'm glad that's over," I said.

"Nothing to it," Cal said.

"But what if that freaked out the other cats and they won't go into the traps next time we do it?"

"Holly," Cal replied, "it's been said before, and I'll say it again. You worry too much." He turned to Maggie. "You want to go to The Yellow Duck for a nightcap?"

"Good idea," she replied. "Holly? Caroline?"

"No, I just want to go home and relax," I said.

"Caroline, if you want to come for a drink, we'll take you home. We both live practically on your doorstep."

"I'll pass this time," Caroline said. "I'm retired from teaching, but I'm still working, and I have a report I must finish tonight."

"Okay," Maggie said. She turned to me. "When are we going to do this again?"

"I don't know. I'll have to speak to Jerry before we decide. And to Zephyrus, of course. We need to know if there's any fall-out from tonight's adventure. I'll phone as soon as I find out."

I watched them drive away and sat for a moment, breathing deeply, and letting the tension drain out of my muscles. Then I aimed the Jeep for home. I didn't have to worry about cats again until tomorrow. As the road rolled out behind us, Caroline told me bits about her teaching career, and I tried to imagine what my life would have been like if I'd chosen to be a scientist.

After I dropped Caroline at her door, I hurried home. My own six felines would be pacing around the back door, demanding to know where I'd been and why I'd gone out on a Sunday night and left them with only the Houseboy and a useless dog. It was at times like this that they got very vocal about what a Big Stupid Kitten I'd turned out to be.



Chapter 6 ~ Protecting Cats

Around midmorning on Monday, Ben decided to deliver his first crop of green onions to Duff's grocery store and pick up the supplies he needed. I hated riding in Bouncing Blue Betsy, because she truly did bounce, not having any springs to speak of, but going to Mora Bay with Ben seemed preferable to pacing around the house, worrying about how Jerry and his six feral patients were getting on.

Ben left me at the store to talk to Duff while he did his shopping, and Duff decided we needed coffee. He also needed a double chocolate chunk muffin.

When we were settled, I said, "Well? Did you go talk to Sybil?"

He sighed. "Yeah."

"And did she bat her eyelashes at you?"

"Nope, none of that. I suppose she's forgotten that men and women are different and how interesting that difference can be."

"Too bad."

Duff took a gulp of coffee. "Science says that a dog's sense of smell is more than 100,000 times stronger than that of any human. I would venture to say that Sybil's sense of injustice is 100,000 times stronger than any other human I know."

I stared at him. "That bad?"

He nodded. "Yes, it was that bad. You probably know that the shortest war in history was between Zanzibar and England in 1896. Zanzibar surrendered after 38 minutes. I surrendered after 15."

"I don't know what to say."

"When I got there, she didn't even thank me for coming, but ripped a strip off me for sending you in my place. I tried to jolly her along, but she wasn't having any. In her opinion, the feral cats should be destroyed and that's that. Any other action is stupid. And she will not rest until all the noisy, stinking vermin are cleansed from Adriana."

Now I knew why Duff had needed a double chocolate chunk muffin. So did I, and had no hesitation in changing my order to include one. My waistline would just have to deal with it. "Then she might still plan on poisoning the cats."

"She didn't say that, but it wouldn't surprise me. I did warn her that anything she might do toward destroying the cats was illegal and that she'd be prosecuted. Her only response was to tell me that a real man would agree with her point of view. Which would include a judge hearing an action against her."

"Duff, I think she's losing her mind. Or has already lost it." I attacked my muffin. "I'm sorry that I was mistaken in my estimation of her character. But what are we going to do about her?"

"I don't know. If her daughter lived here, I'd ask her to get Sybil checked out medically, but as far as I know, she lives in Vancouver."

"Is there any way we can get an address for her? Or a phone number?"

"I can ask around," Duff said. "There are a couple of people who've been here since Year One, and they might know."

"Research is my second name. I could check for Axtons in Vancouver."

"I believe the daughter is married, in which case she won't be an Axton now. Unless she kept her own name. Which isn't likely if she's as conservative as Sybil. And, as far as I know, Sybil had only the one child."

"Then I'll leave it to you to find out what you can," I said.

We were both silent for a while, working on the muffins and the coffee. I didn't hold out much hope for what Duff's research might turn up. The most obvious answer was to set a guard on Zephyrus's place, but I knew the RCMP wouldn't put guards anywhere for feral cats. Nor did I know anyone who'd be willing to stay awake all night, watching.

By the time we walked back to the store, Ben had finished his shopping. We bounced home in Blue Betsy, and he went to work in the greenhouse. I wandered around the house with a duster in my hand, muttering to myself or to whichever cats I disturbed from their morning naps. The only thing I seemed to have accomplished was finding something different to worry about.

At eleven, Jerry called. "The cats have been done and they look fine," he said. "All six are males and all are healthy. The odd thing, though, is that none of them are young. I'd say they're all close to ten."

"I'm so glad they're okay!" I felt relieved. "Melody warned me that the colony might be inbred. Is that relevant to these males not being young?"

"It's a likely explanation, I guess," Jerry said. "If no kittens, or just a few kittens, are surviving, the population will mostly be aging. But we can't determine that on the basis of these first few captures."

"When should we pick them up?"

"By five," he said, "which is when I close up for the day. But call first. I want to make sure they're all clear-eyed and alert before you release them back into the colony. By the way, I've vaccinated them for rabies, and I clipped the tip of the right ears so you can identify them."

For a moment I was puzzled, then realized what he meant. "Oh, then if they get trapped again, we'll know to release them."

"Yes, exactly."

"What do they look like, Jerry? Any particular breed or color?"

"No particular breed," Jerry said, "unless you want to use the term 'ordinary cat.' They're shorthairs and all six are light gray with white chests and tummies."

"When can you do another batch?"

"Hang on a sec; I have to check the calendar." In less than a minute, he was back. "How about next Monday morning again? That's the twenty-seventh. If the other colony cats are disturbed by these little guys coming back, that will give them time to settle down."

"Okay, I'll get it organized."

I'd no sooner hung up the phone than Maggie came in the back door. "Holly, it's so exciting! I've found someone who wants to photograph cats for a calendar."

"Wonderful! Somebody we know?"

"No, but we soon will. Her name is Sally Fraser, and she lives down in Ellis Bay. She's not a professional photographer, but taking pictures has been her hobby since somebody gave her a camera for her tenth birthday." Maggie giggled. "She says she's even done porn pictures."

"Well, that'll be a big help for cats!" I paused. "Of course, we could shave all Doran's fur off and get her to photograph him naked."

Maggie shook her head. "Absolutely not! Doran would never forgive us. We'd have to find one of those Sphinx cats that are born naked."

Not only would Doran not forgive us, he also had ways of taking revenge for indignities foisted on him. "It's a fun idea, but let's forget it. I think people are attracted by furry cats because they look warm and soft and cuddly. Besides, if we had a naked cat here for photographs, Kaylie would no doubt order it to go put on some clothes."

"Oh, I agree," Maggie said. "Anyway, I've made an appointment for Sally to come and photograph Doran and Shaz on Saturday."

"Maybe she could do our six at the same time."

"It will probably take more than one session to do yours."

"Why?"

"Holly, you know what cats are like! They're contrary. They might very well all decide to leave home for the day. Or refuse to pose. There are plenty of sayings about the difficulty of herding cats and I'm sure you made up a few of them."

I sat down at the kitchen table. "Sorry, Maggie. I do know that. But I've been so busy worrying this morning, that my brain isn't paying proper attention."

"Do I need to make my usual comment about your habit of worrying?"

"No. It wouldn't do any good, anyway. I swear it was easier to quit smoking than it is to quit worrying."

Ben came into the kitchen in time to hear that remark. "Holly, you have worry wear," he said.

"What?"

"You wear yourself out worrying. I recommend that you go have a nap."

Ben's voice sounded odd, and I took a closer look at him. "It seems to me that you're the one who needs a nap."

That remark caused Maggie to subject Ben to her scrutiny.

"But..."

"Benjamin," Maggie said. "Behave yourself. Do as Holly says and go have a nap for an hour."

"But I have things to do in the garden," Ben protested. "I don't have time for silly things like naps."

"Regard it as a new adventure," I said. Maggie and I each took one of his hands and led him into the bedroom. To my amazement, he actually sat down on the bed and then lay down.

"Just for an hour," he said. "I don't know why, but I do feel tired, like I'd been digging ditches all day. Maybe I've got the flu. Maybe I should get up and take some pills."

"Later," I said firmly. "I'll wake you up in about an hour."



Maggie and I decided to let Ben sleep until he woke up. If he was incubating the flu, sleep would be the best thing for him. I found myself worrying—of course!—because Ben was never sick.

By three, I decided I'd better wake him up. I needed to organize getting the feral cats from Jerry and releasing them into the colony. I got as far as the bedroom door and had to smile. Ben was covered in tame cats. George was curled up on Ben's pillow, next to his head. Ming sat on his chest, apparently sleeping. Kaylie, Cato, and Caesar were snuggled up on Ben's right side, with Poppy on his left. Nicky lay at the end of the bed, pretending to be a footrest.

"Ben," I said, "time to rise and shine."

He woke with a start, turned his head to glance at the clock, and let out a yelp. "It's late! Why did you let me sleep? I have to get moving!"

"No, you don't," I said. "But I do. How do you feel?"

For a minute, he didn't seem to know the answer. His face was flushed, and he looked kind

of stunned. "Not good."

"Do you still think it's flu?"

He frowned. "It might be, but worse than I ever remember having it. I'm so tired and achy, I feel like I could sleep for a month."

"I took some stew out of the freezer for supper," I said. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

That startled me. "My God, you *are* sick! In all the years we've been married, that's the first time I've known you to refuse food."

For some reason, that comment upset him. "I don't want to be sick! I don't have time to lie around in bed. Can you go look in the medicine cabinet and see what's there? I need to get up and do stuff."

"All right." But I had a different idea about what should be done.

When I returned to the bedroom, I said, "Okay, you can get up now. I'm taking you into Mora Bay to see Dr. Giles."

"Holly, I don't need a doctor! I need something to make this flu go away."

I shooed the cats away from Ben and waited while he got to his feet. "You'd better put a jacket on. It's not summer yet."

"I don't want to go. I know it's the flu. I've got chills now."

"Dr. Giles said it doesn't sound like flu to him. Besides, you hardly ever get flu. We need to find out why you feel awful."

I shepherded him into the Cherokee. As I maneuvered the twisty road, I managed to glance at him now and then. A couple of times he looked like he was asleep, but then a bend in the road would jerk his body in one direction or another and his eyes would open again. When we parked in front of the clinic, I asked, "How do you feel now?"

"I just want to lie down and sleep. Or die, whichever comes first."

That scared me. I'd never heard him talk like that. I hurried him into the doctor's office.

Dr. Giles was wearing his usual sweatshirt and jeans. "Ben, you look like hell," he said, with his also usual bluntness. "What are your symptoms?"

"I'm tired; I want to sleep forever. Chills, fever. Sore muscles."

"And no appetite," I added. "When he said he didn't want supper, I knew you had to have a look at him. He never turns down food."

"Sounds like the kissing disease." Dr. Giles rose. "Come on into the examination room, Ben."

Twenty minutes later, they came back out, and I hid my fingers inside a magazine so they wouldn't notice I'd been chewing my nails.

"What's the kissing disease?" Ben asked, slumping into his chair.

"Mononucleosis," Dr. Giles said. "You can get it through kissing, but more likely from sharing cups or glasses or eating utensils. Or being too close when somebody who has it coughs or sneezes. And that's what you've got, Ben. Though we can call it 'mono,' like most people do."

"Where would I have caught it?"

"Where have you been in the last four to seven weeks?"

Ben started to shake his head, then winced. "We've been to Victoria a couple of times. I remember some people sneezing and assumed it was flu."

"It doesn't much matter," Dr. Giles said. "But taking care of yourself does matter. A lot. Most people get mono as children and often don't even realize it. But you're sixty-three, and you're likely to have a much worse time of it."

"Gee, thanks!"

The doctor ignored Ben's sarcasm. "That's why I took a throat culture, to confirm my suspicion that it's the Epstein-Barr virus causing your mono."

"Isn't there a vaccine?"

"No. Once you have that virus in your system, it stays forever, and you'll be able to spread it. So, take all the precautions you normally take against catching colds and flu, or passing them on." Dr. Giles smiled. "And no playing football!"

Ben looked confused. "Football?"

"Yes. You might injure your spleen, which can become enlarged with this disease. If it ruptures, which means a sudden, sharp pain on the left side of your upper abdomen, that could require surgery."

"You don't have to worry about him playing football," I said. "Is there anything you can give him for this?"

Dr. Giles gave Ben a stern look. "You can take a painkiller if you need it. But there's just one thing you absolutely must do, and that is rest." He paused for emphasis. "I would say for a minimum of four weeks."

"Four weeks! But I don't have time for that! There's no way I can lie around for four weeks. I have a business. I have a garden and a greenhouse which need at least eight hours of work every day."

"Well, get somebody to help." Dr. Giles leaned forward. "I said four weeks and I mean four weeks. If you don't do that, you could develop hepatitis or jaundice or meningitis. Mono can also cause problems with your heart and nervous system. If you overdo it, a relapse could be really serious, especially at your age."

"But..."

I said, "No 'buts,' Ben. I don't want to lose you."

He stared at me in amazement. "Lose me? It can't be that serious!" He looked from Dr. Giles to me and back to Dr. Giles again, but neither of us backed down. "Can cats get mono?"

"No, they can't," Dr. Giles said. "Dogs can get the virus, but they heal on their own, like humans. Listen to me, Ben. You need to eat a healthy diet and drink lots of fluids and rest, rest, rest. The minute you feel the tiniest bit tired, lie down. The more rest you get, the sooner you'll get better."

"All right." Ben obviously didn't feel like mounting his usual arguments about why he should do exactly what he wanted to do. That was worrying in itself, both because he didn't usually give up so easily, and because he was likely plotting to do what he wanted anyway.

On the way home, Ben said, "Remember when I broke my arm?"

"Of course. When you were building Maggie's little house, in June of 2006. That's almost two years ago now. Why?"

"Remember how much fuss I made about being sidelined?"

"I certainly do. You were a royal pain in the ass. And I hope you're not going to be like that this time."

"But that was different. I had something seriously wrong with me. And I had to be careful so the arm would heal properly."

"No, this is not different."

"Okay, okay, I hear you. I heard Dr. Giles, too."

But I didn't believe him. I could practically see the wheels going around and round in his brain. He'd be thinking that two or three days of rest should do it and then he'd be able to get

back to work. I found it daunting to realize that I'd have to stay home and keep tabs on him, or he'd be back working and wrecking his chances to recuperate.

It wasn't until we were nearly home, that Ben said, "Oh, I thought you were going to pick up the ferals and take them back to the colony."

"I phoned Maggie. She and Cal are doing it. They're also going to have a talk with Zephyrus and see how the other cats have been making out."

Ben had nothing else to say. I wondered if he'd been hoping to get rid of me so he could sneak out to the greenhouse. Perhaps I was being too suspicious, but I had vivid memories of trying to keep him from wrecking himself when he'd broken his arm. He was just as determined as Doran to get his own way, but a lot sneakier.



I agreed to let Ben off eating my healthy stew for supper, but on condition that he agreed to go back to bed. For once, he didn't argue. The cats and I ate our suppers in solitary splendor. Nicky had apparently decided that he should stay with his hero and lay stretched across the foot of the bed. Afterward, I did Ben's chores of shutting the hens in their house, and putting out food for the raccoons on the little cedar deck off the kitchen. By the time the dishes were done, it was eight o'clock.

"Hey, Holly! How's the boy?" Cal asked, as he and Maggie came in the back door.

"He's got mononucleosis," I said, "and, of course, he's in denial. The doc says he has to rest for at least a month, maybe longer."

Cal laughed. "Yeah, I bet that went over like a lead balloon."

"Have you both had it?" I asked. "I did when I was a kid. Ginna got it, and like a good, thoughtful sister, passed it on to me."

He and Maggie reassured me that they'd both had mono, and then settled in the living room with the cats while I made drinks for us. I was eager to hear about the ferals. "Did you release the cats? How did that go?"

"Everything went fine," Cal said. "The fixed cats were kind of spooked and I guess the rest of the colony was, too, but they all settled down."

"We stayed long enough to help Zephyrus feed them," Maggie added. "She said everything seemed fine."

"Did she say how the other cats were after we took away the first six?"

Maggie smiled. "You worry too much, Holly. Or have I said that before? Zephyrus told us they've been acting normally all week."

Ben appeared in the archway between the dining room and living room. "What's going on?"

"Just the usual, Benjamin," his mother replied. "We're talking about cats."

Ben frowned. "I feel like I've been away forever." He sat down heavily in his favorite corner chair and Poppy immediately climbed into his lap.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "We went to Mora Bay together this morning. And again this afternoon." My mind slid back to the ferals. "I hope Duff phones soon. He said he'd try to find out how to get in touch with Sybil's daughter. We suspect she might be going into dementia. I'm worried about her poisoning the ferals."

For several minutes, we speculated on what might finally trigger Sybil to try poison, and what would happen if she did. There wasn't much we could do, except call the cops, but it was interesting to speculate on how Sybil would react if Zephyrus attacked her with all those little

rocks she kept by the fireplace. Or the baseball bat.

I rose, gathering glasses for refills. "Well, since it was only this morning that I talked to Duff, he probably hasn't had time to do anything."

When I came back with filled glasses and distributed them, Ben looked surprised.

"Where's my beer?" he asked.

"No beer for you," I said. "Dr. Giles told you to eat a healthy diet. I don't think beer counts as healthy."

"But..." Ben subsided, scowling.

"No buts, Benjamin," Maggie said. "You can't afford to fool around with mono. Especially not at your age."

Ben knew it was pointless arguing with his mother. And I knew that, as soon as she'd gone home, he'd be nagging me. I hoped I could convince him to be sensible. I had a lot of things I needed to get done besides convincing him to obey the doctor's orders.

"I'm not fooling around," Ben said. "I've been asleep all damn afternoon and half the evening. A person can only sleep so much, and I've already done more than my share." He turned suddenly to me. "Did you shut the hens in? Did you feed the raccoons?"

"Yes, and yes," I said.

"I'll be doing that again in a day or two," Ben said. "I'm sure I've caught up on all the sleep I've missed for the last five years. There's a limit, you know."

I sighed and took another sip of scotch, hoping it would give me strength. "Well, I believe what Dr. Giles says, even if you don't. He said you were to stay in bed and I'm going to make sure you do."

Ben glared at me. "Holly, I know my body better than you do, and certainly better than Dr. Giles does. His idea of my taking four weeks off is damn stupid."

"So sue me," I said, and turned to look at Maggie. "Perhaps I should phone my Aunt Ruth in Fort St. John. She'd probably love to spend a month down here, cooking and cleaning and keeping Ben in line."

"Not Aunt Ruth!" Ben moaned. "Holly, have a heart! She doesn't know how to do anything except drink gin. And she will! She'll drink every drop of liquor we have in the house and then some. And break things. And frighten the cats. If she's in the house, I won't be able to sleep because of worrying about what she's going to destroy next."

"That might be a good idea," Maggie said, ignoring Ben. "I won't have much time to nurse you, Benjamin, because of the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society*. I'm president and Holly is secretary, and we have a major rescue operation on our hands."

Ben glanced at all of us. He knew there was no use appealing to Cal; he'd side with Maggie, whatever she decided. And he had learned that I could be more stubborn than even Nicky. There wasn't much he could do except pretend to go along with us.

"If you behave," I said, "I won't call Aunt Ruth."

"Fine," Ben said grimly, "but who's going to take care of the garden and the greenhouse? This is the busiest time of year for a farmer. And that's why I'm not staying in bed for a month!"

"Lots of people will help," I said.

"Oh, sure!" Ben said sarcastically. "But who's going to tell them what to do?"

I knew he was right. Unless we got somebody with experience in vegetable gardening, Ben would have to supervise. But I'd worry about that tomorrow, and phone around to see who, if anybody, was available. Duff might know of someone.

Maggie and Cal decided it was time to go. I heard them shut the back door, then pulled Ben

to his feet and steered him into the bedroom. I helped him off with his clothes and into his pajamas, then into bed.

"Sleep tight!" I said.

"Wait a minute! Where's my cup of tea? And my grapes? I'm starving."

I'd forgotten, and hoped he had, too, that one of his tasks was to make a pot of tea and bring it to the bedroom, along with snacks, so that we could sit up and read and sip tea until our eyes started falling shut. "Sorry! I'll be back in a flash."

It takes more than a flash to prepare tea, mugs, grapes, and cheese. It seemed pointless for me to stay up any longer, so I shooed Nicky out the door for a final pee, and locked the door after he came back in. At such times, I wished the cat flap was big enough for a big, fat dog to wriggle through. I also hoped sleep would overtake Ben before I got back with the goodies.

No such luck. Ben was sitting up, propped against his pillow and the headboard, *The History of Greece* in his hands. I loaded up the side tables and then watched proceedings while changing into my own pajamas.

George sat on the Houseboy's chest and nuzzled his hand for bits of cheese. Nicky sat on Ben's feet and whined for whatever food might be hiding in Ben's fingers. The other five cats snuggled up to or on various pieces of Ben's anatomy and looked as if they were settling down for the night, but perked ears and steady gazes told me they were also waiting hopefully for something to nibble.

"Holly, can't you do something about these cats? It's hard to concentrate when they're all staring at me."

"I could throw them off the bed."

Ben looked amazed. "Oh, but you mustn't do that. They have as much right to sleep here as I do. Besides, that would be lese felinity."

"Now you know what I've been putting up with for all these years," I said, tucking myself into bed and picking up my murder mystery. "These cats have decided you need nursing, so you might as well relax and enjoy it. It will be interesting to see how you manage to wriggle down under the blankets without disturbing them."

This was something I'd been doing for years, and I still hadn't learned to slide down between the sheets so smoothly that it didn't disturb all those furry bodies lying on top of mine. At least one feline would complain and leap off the bed indignantly. Sometimes, all of them did. Naturally, they were back within minutes, prodding and poking and kneading new comfortable spots. I'd never found out what they did when I rolled over in my sleep, and I didn't want to.

When Ben finally gave in to exhaustion, he seemed to have stopped worrying about his coterie of nurses. By the time he'd turned out the light, and wriggled down under the covers, they were all on the floor, complaining. Five minutes later, they were all back again, and I assumed they'd settle down on me, their accustomed mattress. But they didn't. All six settled on Ben or beside him, snuggled up close.

I watched the performance, both surprised and touched. Apparently, the cats knew Ben was sick and they really were nursing him with warmth and soothing purrs. I just wished that, collectively, they weighed a couple of hundred pounds, so they could keep him pinned in bed for a month.

"Dream on!" I said to myself, and turned my light out.



Chapter 7 ~ Cats Nursing

Ben slept all day Tuesday, much to my surprise. How could anybody sleep so much? It had to be good for him, but that didn't stop me worrying. Knowing Ben, he would never stay in bed that long without complaining unless he was really sick.

I'd been half joking when I said the cats were nursing him, but it was true. Every time Ben got up to go to the bathroom, one or two of the cats, usually George, followed him, then herded him back into the bedroom when he was through. In the morning, Kaylie and Ming appeared in the kitchen for the special breakfast that Ben always made for them and paced around, complaining about the slow service, while I hurriedly prepared their yogurt and sliced banana. As soon as they'd eaten and visited the litter box, they disappeared back into the bedroom. Nicky and the other four cats followed much the same routine.

Ben did come stumbling out of the bedroom for lunch when he heard me say 'split pea soup' and he ate two bowls of it. However, when he rose from the table and looked as if he might head for the living room, George started yelling at him. Loudly.

"What's wrong with this cat?" Ben sounded a little stunned.

"He's telling you to get back in bed."

Ben turned and headed for the bedroom, with George in the lead and still meowing. "Who needs Aunt Ruth?" Ben muttered. "This cat is an evil dictator."

"Well, you did name him King of Holly Haven. And you said you'd never be more than a lowly houseboy."

Ben didn't bother responding to that and, when I looked in on him twenty minutes later, after the kitchen was tidy, he was asleep again.

"Good boy!" I said to George and went back to the kitchen. I had to figure out what to do about the greenhouse and the garden before Ben started feeling well enough to disobey orders.

I had remembered to let the hens out and feed them, and to fill the bird feeders. I'd meant to skip feeding the deer, but two of them came around the back of the house and stared in the kitchen window, trying to look hungry. I gave up, got their food out of the workshop, and spread some in the meadow, below the greenhouse.

"Wild and free!" I grumbled at them. "But you're not. You're a bunch of freeloaders, trading your wild spirits for a bag of carrots."

The deer, naturally, ignored me. I realized, as I walked back to the house, that I would have ignored me, too. They had a good thing going and, just like humans, they weren't going to give up easily.

By mid-afternoon, I was getting desperate. In order to keep Ben in bed, or at least resting, I had to find somebody to deal with the greenhouse and garden. If I didn't solve that problem, Ben would be out there working, no matter what Dr. Giles said.

The handiest helper was Cal, next door, otherwise known as Mr. Fix-it. But I didn't even bother asking him. He'd never cultivated a vegetable garden and had said often enough that he knew nothing about growing plants. He could build houses and fix engines and raise goats but probably wouldn't know a sweet pea from a potato plant.

Maggie had gardened when she lived in Moose Jaw, but I couldn't ask her because she had to run the Adriana Cat Rescue. Keeping Ben immobile would likely keep me tied to Holly Haven far more than I usually was. When I thumbed through my book of phone numbers, I realized that almost everybody I knew worked full-time. That included *The Garden Guys*. Besides, they were

landscapers, not market gardeners, and might not know much about green onions or heritage tomatoes.

Then I came across Derek Jamison's number. He'd been an ecology student, working for the Trustees, assessing land use, when we were developing the new by-laws. He had helped Ben build Maggie's house and also worked in the greenhouse two years past, when Ben broke his arm. I dialed the Victoria number, and it was Derek's mother who answered.

"Oh no," she said, "Derek doesn't live with us anymore. He graduated last year and he's now working in Vancouver."

I explained my problem and she gave me Derek's number in Vancouver. When I got him on the phone, I explained the problem again.

"Hey, I'm sorry Ben's laid up," he said. "He doesn't like being sidelined, does he? I'm glad to hear from you, though, because I had a good time working on your place. Look, I've got vacation time coming up toward the end of next month and I'm not sure whether my plans will work out or not. If they don't, I'd enjoy spending a week gardening."

"If you can, I'd really appreciate it."

I had to be content with that. But Derek's 'maybe' time would be at least a month away, if it happened at all, and by that time the weeds would have overgrown everything. And they'd probably be munching on the wire fencing any time now, I thought gloomily.

As soon as I hung up the phone, it rang. Duff responded to my 'hello' with, "Holly, I have good news!"

"I could do with some," I said. "What?"

"I got hold of Sybil's daughter in Vancouver. Her name's Dorothea and she's just retired. So, she and Fred, her hubby, are going to come over and see if they can convince Sybil to be reasonable."

"I wish them luck," I said. "They'll need it. Did you tell Dorothea about Sybil's threats to poison the cats?"

"Sure," said Duff. "I didn't say the word 'dementia,' but Dorothea sounds pretty smart. Besides, with Sybil being ninety, she's probably already thought of it herself."

"When are they coming?"

"Now, Holly," Duff said, "I couldn't risk sounding like I was trying to run their lives, could I? I'm sure they'll be exactly like greyhounds."

"Pardon?"

"Greyhounds are the fastest dogs on earth, with speeds of up to 45 miles per hour. Dorothea and Fred will probably be even faster." He didn't wait for a comment. "Ben mentioned that he had some lettuces about ready for market. Could you bring me a boxful?"

"Oh, you already know that Ben's ill."

Duff laughed. "Sorry, I wasn't laughing about Ben being ill. But you should know how fast news spreads on this island. I hope he gets better fast. The next two months are the busiest for market gardeners."

"I'll see what I can do about the lettuces."

But first I'd see if Ben was asleep. He was. Surrounded by cats. So, it was safe for me to invade his territory and see if there was anything useful that I could do.

Nicky came with me and lay down outside the garden gate, no doubt relieved to have something more or less normal going on. I went into the greenhouse and stared at the lettuce beds. How could one tell if a lettuce was ripe? But I guessed that if a lettuce looked like the ones I saw in the grocery store, then it was probably ready. I poked at some butter lettuce, and it

seemed ready to eat. Same with half a dozen of the romaine heads. First thing in the morning, I'd load them into the Jeep and take them to the store.

I looked at some of the other green things growing and didn't recognize them. Then I reached the tomato plants. Aha! I could tell the difference between a weed and a tomato plant. I gently pulled out a few small weedlets, but there weren't many. Soon I was in foreign territory again and decided to give up. When I inspected the outside garden, I thought I could see some weeds, but I was afraid to pull them in case I was wrong. All the green shoots looked about the same size.

Nicky and I went back to the house, to find Ben standing at the sliding glass door to the balcony off the kitchen.

"What were you doing out there?" he demanded.

"Just checking to see if everything is okay. And I pulled a few weeds."

"You leave those plants alone!" Ben was nearly screaming. "You have the worst black thumbs I've ever seen. In fact, you have eight black fingers as well! You'll ruin all my hard work!"

I told him I hadn't weeded anything but the tomato plants and he calmed down a little. "Don't you touch anything more in my garden unless I tell you what to do."

When he learned that Duff wanted lettuce, he agreed that I could take some into Mora Bay, but only if he chose which ones.

"Okay. But you're to go right back to bed after you've chosen."

Grumbling, Ben stomped back to the bedroom. "I hate this! I hate being sick. It makes me feel useless. If I can't do anything, what good am I?" He crawled back into the bed, disrupting several cats. They didn't seem to mind and returned to the bed to purr at him. He slumped back against his pillow. If he'd been six years old instead of sixty-three, his lower lip would have been protruding.



The next morning, Ben got out of bed and dressed in a manner that said he intended to resume his normal life of getting things done. He ate a good breakfast. In spite of my protests, he also made yogurt and bananas for Ming and Kaylie. But George didn't believe him, any more than I did. He paced around Ben's chair and yelled.

"You can stop nagging, Your Majesty," Ben said. "I'm feeling pretty good."

Indeed, he seemed his usual self while he pointed at the lettuces that he thought were ready and watched me as I carefully loaded two boxes. But, when I'd put them into the Jeep and gone back into the house to get my bag, he was hanging onto a kitchen chair and looking pale.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Dizzy," he muttered. "Came on all of a sudden."

"You get back in bed!"

Ben didn't even argue. He got back into the bed. "Did you feed the deer? Did you let the chickens out?"

"Yes to all of that."

"Well, I might as well sleep. I don't have the energy to do anything. And nobody needs me, anyway."

I managed not to roll my eyes until I was back in the kitchen. And I was so fed up with Ben's attitude, that I even managed not to worry about him until I'd returned from Mora Bay.

Maggie must have been watching for my return because she and BJ came in the back door just as I was getting the coffee pot ready. "How's Ben?" she asked.

"Being a pain."

She nodded. "Men aren't good at being sick, Holly. And Ben is worse than most I've encountered."

I plugged in the coffee pot and Maggie headed for the bedroom. I followed. Ben woke up when BJ tried to climb up on the bed and kept falling off.

Maggie lifted BJ onto the bed. The dachshund promptly started licking Ben's face. He sat up, spluttering.

"Why don't you bring everybody else in here, too?" Ben asked. "There's room for a few of the hens and Mr. Mighty and maybe one of the deer."

BJ jumped down and Nicky followed suit. The dogs hadn't had a romp together since Monday and I was sure they wanted to go out and run around for a while. Nicky stood on Ben's side of the bed, put his chin on the edge, and whined.

That actually brought the hint of a smile to Ben's face. "See if you can get me outta here, dog. Your evil mother and grandmother are keeping me prisoner in this bed."

Maggie and I both rolled our eyes.

Ben struggled into a sitting position, and George put one paw on his arm, as much as to say, "Stay!" Poppy walked up his stomach and his chest and licked his chin. Ming rose from his position beside Ben and plumped onto Ben's stomach.

"Oof!" A common response when one is pinned down by a 20-pound cat. Ben heaved a sigh that could have swept through trees like a spring gale. "Looks like the entire famdamily is trying to keep me down." He wriggled back under the covers and pointedly turned his back on us.

Maggie and I returned to the kitchen and inhaled reviving mugs of caffeine. I opened the sliding door for Nicky and BJ, and they eagerly scurried out and went off to take care of whatever business they had. Probably trying to herd the deer. They never gave up on that, no matter how much the deer laughed.

"How are you going to manage, Holly?" Maggie took a chocolate chip cookie from the plateful I'd put on the kitchen table.

"He won't let me do anything in the greenhouse. And I can't think of anybody who would be able to come and help. I finally phoned *The Garden Guys* last night. Zack told me they have no experience with vegetable gardens. I asked if they knew anybody who did, and Zack said, 'Yeah, Ben.' So I don't know what to do. And I must do something, or he'll be out in the garden weeding and hoeing like there's no tomorrow."

"I'll ask Cal if he knows of anybody," Maggie said.

"Well, at least Ben can't get into Bouncing Blue Betsy and go anywhere."

"Why not?"

"Because Cato is up on the dresser, sitting on his car keys."



The rest of the week and the weekend crawled by. I stayed out of the garden and the cats helped me keep Ben trapped inside the house. I envied them because they didn't understand English and therefore didn't have to listen to the complaints. But life outside the sickroom continued.

On Saturday, Sally Fraser came to Maggie's house and photographed Doran and Shaz. When

that was done, she came over for a preliminary look at my six. I had to ask her to tiptoe to the bedroom door and peer at the cat crew from a distance, since I didn't want to wake up Ben. Sally, a slim young woman with black hair, was enthusiastic about my feline family and fascinated by the idea of them looking after Ben as if he were a kitten. We made a tentative photography date for May ninth, two weeks away.

Sunday night, with Ben safely guarded by six cats and two dogs, Maggie and I drove to Zephyrus's cat colony to do another cat trapping. One of Maggie's volunteers, Harry, met us there, as did Jimmy from *The Garden Guys* next door. And, for the second time, the operation went smoothly. The traps had all been sprung within an hour and we delivered them, with Harry's help, to Jerry's office garage.

"That's twelve done," I said to Maggie, as we headed for home. "I wonder how many more we have to capture."

"Jerry told me he estimates there might be sixty or seventy altogether."

"He can't possibly know that," I said. "As far as I know, he's never been near the colony. That must be Zephyrus's guesstimate. And it would be a guess because there's no way she could actually count the cats. Let's say there are seventy-two, to make the math easier. Six goes into seventy-two twelve times and we've done two trappings, so that leaves another ten trips."

"Holly, your math is as clumsy as a ten-year-old's."

"Sorry, didn't Ben ever tell you? I'm not perfect." I sighed. "And I have black thumbs. Also, black fingers."

Maggie patted my shoulder. "Take heart," she said, "Ben will get better."

"The sooner the better. Otherwise, the cats may have to split into two teams, because I'm going to need nursing, too."

We were nearly home before I remembered I had a question for Maggie. "How did Harry get to the colony? I didn't notice another car when I parked."

"He rides a bicycle. He doesn't have a car."

"Why not? Riding a bike would be hard work on this bumpy island and its bumpy roads."

"I don't think he can afford a car," Maggie said. "All I know is that he lives in that old motel near The Yellow Duck. And that he's retired."

I thought about Harry. He was tall but slightly stooped with a caved-in chest. He had wisps of gray hair brushed back over a bald spot. All of that said he was likely in his early seventies at least. He was very quiet, and so calm that he reminded me of Henry, my Buddhist cat. "Is he married?"

"I don't believe he is. And no, I don't know what he did for a living."

"Oh, too bad," I said. "I guess I'll have to corner him and find out what I want to know directly."

Maggie smiled. "You can try. He didn't respond to my questions. All I know is that he loves cats, which he told me when he replied to my plea for volunteers in *Looking For Love*."

I pulled into the driveway. "Oh, well, perhaps Zephyrus can find out what he's all about. The fact that they both love cats might work."



On Monday afternoon, Maggie and I picked up four fixed cats. "What happened to numbers five and six?" I asked Jerry.

"They both had respiratory infections. Those are extremely hard to get rid of and close to

impossible with a feral who would sooner rip your arm off than submit to being medicated." He caught Maggie's expression and added, "I'm sorry, but you can't expect to save them all."

Maggie nodded. "No, of course not. But doesn't that mean some of the others will be infected, too?"

"More than likely," Jerry said. "Depends on whether those two had contact with other cats. We'll just have to wait and see." He picked up a cat carrier from behind the counter and set it on top. I recognized it as mine. "However, the good news is that Little Cat has recovered from her bladder infection and can go home now."

"Zephyrus will be thrilled," Maggie said, smiling again. "She was asking again last night how the cat was doing."

Little Cat seemed quite content in the carrier and made small inquiring noises only a couple of times as we drove the bumpy road to the cat colony.

This time it was Zack who walked down the road from *The Garden Guys* property to give us a hand carrying the cat traps. He and I made two trips into the scrub alder and watched four short-haired gray cats leap out and disappear into the underbrush.

Zephyrus was definitely thrilled to have Little Cat home. "What a lovely girl!" she said, stroking the cat's dark, mottled fur. Almost at once Little Cat demanded the freedom to go exploring. The first place she stopped was the new secondhand couch, sitting where the old smelly one had been. She sniffed it thoroughly everywhere, front and back.

"I swear she's frowning," Zack said, with a chuckle. "She can't figure out why the couch doesn't smell right."

"I hope she doesn't decide to fix that," Zephyrus said.

Apparently Little Cat found the new couch acceptable as it was. She marched around the living room, sniffing a few more things, then went into the bathroom, where she could be heard kicking up litter in the cat box.

We all blew sighs of relief and talked for a few minutes about the colony. I thought Zephyrus might be upset about Jerry euthanizing two of the cats, but she had a commonsense approach.

"Those cats would eventually die anyway, and probably suffer a lot before they did," she said. "And it would be cruel to the rest of the colony to leave them alive and able to spread the infection." Then she smiled. "And it isn't as though we don't have enough cats around here already!"

Maggie and I left, eager to get home. Cal was cooking dinner for her, and all I wanted to do was relax and not worry about things. Doing Ben's chores around the place wasn't difficult, but the worry was killing me. For once, I lucked in; nobody phoned, and Ben kept quiet. I even went to bed early.

Tuesday morning, the mail brought the pension application forms Ben had requested for Zephyrus. He looked delighted.

"Well, it's something I can do without much effort," he said. "I'll fill them out as far as I can. Then she'll have to come and sign them." He was silent for a moment. "I should bring my budget up to date, too. You'll have to give me the details of everything you've spent and how much money you've taken in for egg and vegetable sales."

I left him in his den, hunched over Zephyrus's forms, and managed to refrain from groaning until I was out of earshot. Not only did I lack green thumbs, I was no good at accounting either.



On Tuesday night, Maggie and Cal decided they should come and cheer up the poor invalid. "Good luck with that," I muttered to Maggie. "I'm going over to visit Caroline. I need a break." Maggie responded with a comforting pat, and I left the three of them in the living room with drinks, under the supervision of six cats, and two dogs watching intently for any snacks that might appear.

I walked the few hundred yards to Caroline's house, taking with me the peacock feather and catnip mouse I'd finally remembered to buy for her. Instead of asking what I wanted, she invited me in, so I assumed she was pleased to see me.

"How's April?" I asked.

Caroline smiled with obvious pleasure. "She talks! When she asks a question, she says 'prrrrt?' with her voice rising at the end. When she's making a statement, she says 'prrrrt!' with an exclamation mark at the end. And this is how she tells a story: 'prrrt—grumble—prrrt—grumm—prrrrt—mmmm—prrrt—grumm—prrrt—mmmm,' though I have no idea what she's telling me. I had no idea that animals could express themselves in a way that humans can understand."

"Did you understand what story she was telling you?"

"Well, no," Caroline admitted. "But I knew she was telling me one."

April herself lay in the middle of the living room floor, kicking hell out of the catnip mouse with her hind feet. Her black, white, and orange coloring was vivid against the light beige carpet. "You'll probably understand more of what she's saying when you've spent more time together," I said, crossing my fingers that this would happen.

"She's quite sensitive," Caroline said. "One day I took the lid off a plastic container of Temptations and poured a few of the candies on her place mat in the kitchen. She started to eat. Then I accidentally knocked the lid off the counter, and it hit her on the head. She seemed frightened, though the lid is so light it couldn't possibly have hurt her."

"She hasn't been with you long," I said. "She's probably still a little nervous."

Caroline frowned. "She's never shown it any other time. Anyway, now I'm two people, Caroline the Evil Monster in the kitchen, where my obvious purpose is to kill her. And I'm Caroline the Good in the rest of the house. Since then, I just put treats on the hearth, and she always finds them."

"Try putting the treats into a thoroughly tamed, non-violent, plastic bag, which will get rid of the lid problem. Once April becomes fully confident that you're not out to get her, you'll be able to give her treats in the kitchen again."

"Well, if our relationship lasts that long. I'm not saying I want to keep her, you know." Caroline went on to the next subject. "What does it mean when she butts me with her head?"

"She's depositing facial pheromones on you. That says she trusts you."

"In spite of the lid?"

"Does she give you head-butts in the kitchen?" I asked.

Caroline thought about that for a few seconds, then shook her head.

"Then you're right about her thinking you're two people," I said. "When she forgets about Caroline the Evil Monster, and becomes more confident of Caroline the Good, she might give you love bites, too. Not all cats do that, but when it happens, they're saying you're awesome. If you were to let her outside, she'd probably bring you dead mice or birds as a gift, a sign of true friendship."

"I'm not going to let her outside," Caroline said. "Zephyrus told me April has always been an

indoor cat and that keeping her in will be safer for her. Besides, I definitely don't want dead presents and I don't want her to run away and perhaps be attacked by raccoons or dogs."

We were silent for a minute or two, watching April knead the carpet. Suddenly, she jumped up, raced to the other end of the room, and began chasing her tail.

"She's high on catnip," I said.

Caroline laughed. "That's cute! It's cute when she kneads, too. It looks as if she's grabbing for something. Miss Grabby-Paws!"

The only thing I knew for sure was that Caroline appeared to be fascinated by April. But that didn't mean that she'd become a cat person. I hoped she would, but decided I'd better go through my address book and look for another possible home for the calico.

She continued with another April story. "The contractor came yesterday to fix a small problem with one of the kitchen cupboard doors. He happened to see the litter box and said, 'Oh, do you have a cat?' I couldn't let that one go by, so I said, 'No, that's for company.'"

"There are at least a dozen people I wish I'd said that to!"

"He was offended, I think," Caroline said. "He told me, rather stiffly, that he was allergic to cats and wanted to avoid making eye contact with or physically touching any cats I might have."

"No doubt he imagines ignoring cats will make them ignore him, but it has the opposite effect. They'd regard him as non-threatening and friendly and would want to sit on his lap or rub up against him."

We talked about cats for another few minutes and then Caroline asked, "How's Ben? Hard at work in the greenhouse?"

"Oh! Hasn't anyone told you? He's ill."

Caroline shook her head. "I haven't lived here long enough for people to know who I am or where I live and, so far, I've been enjoying that. But it also means they don't tell me any gossip." She paused. "I hope it's not serious."

I sighed. "It won't be serious, if he rests for the next month. He's got mono. But he's also a workaholic and is frantic to get back into the garden and the greenhouse. It's taking most of my energy to make him stay in bed or, at least, on it. I'm sorry; I should have asked if you've ever had it."

"Oh, yes. Years ago."

"I wish he'd had it as a kid, like I did. He's just awful about illness. Won't admit that he feels lousy, then complains non-stop when it hits him between the eyes." I sighed again. "You'll be interested to know that our six cats are nursing him."

"Nursing him?" Caroline didn't look as if she believed me.

"Yes. Human friendship with cats is a double-sided thing. In some ways they regard us as parents because we feed and groom them. But in other ways, they seem to think we're big, stupid kittens who are hopeless at hunting and climbing trees, even though they try to teach us."

"That's fascinating!" Caroline said. "What do they do to look after Ben?"

"For one thing, they do a lot of purring when they're snuggled up to him in bed."

She nodded. "You told me that cats purr to heal themselves. I take it they're trying to heal Ben with their purring."

"And lower his heart rate, perhaps, since it lowers theirs. They also apparently understand that he needs to stay still, so that his body uses what energy it has in order to heal itself. My senior cat, in particular, gets quite upset if Ben stays out of bed for long. He paces around and yells at Ben. It's amazing what loud noises a ten-pound cat can produce."

"That is amazing. Cats are a lot smarter than I realized." Caroline paused. "Who's looking

after Ben's market gardening business?"

"Nobody. I've tried and tried but I can't find anybody with the time and, especially, the knowledge to run it for the next month to six weeks. He won't let me do it because I'm hopeless."

"Black thumbs?"

"Oh, definitely. I must admit I'm getting a little desperate." That was the understatement of the year. "The doctor says Ben simply must rest, because of his age, for the next month. Maybe longer. If he goes back to work, he could have a relapse, and that would take forever for him to get over."

Caroline leaned back in her chair. "Why don't you ask me?"

Startled, I stared at her. "But you're a physicist!"

"Does that mean I can't be anything else?" Caroline asked tartly.

"Well, no, but..."

"Holly, my parents owned a vegetable greenhouse in the Fraser Valley. I was out there working in it before I was six. Then I did it after school, weekends, and summer holidays. When they finally agreed to travel for a year, something they'd dreamed of all their lives, I took a year off college and ran the place while they were gone."

I guess I was still staring at her because she smiled and went on. "I continued helping out, now and then, until they sold the place. They were patient enough to teach me all the technical knowledge about plants as well as how to tend them. I don't suppose I've forgotten any of it, though I'm not up to date on new varieties. And I'd be happy to come over and look after your greenhouse."

"Ben's greenhouse," I said automatically. "That's wonderful! I can't tell you what a relief that is to me. And he'll pay you, of course."

"Of course," said Caroline. "My altruism only extends to giving up some of my time. It doesn't include working for nothing."

It was such a pleasure to talk with someone who didn't mince words that I laughed. "Ben will be relieved, too, though it may take some time for him to accept your help. He'll probably think he has to teach you everything."

Caroline smiled. "Don't worry about that. I can deal with Ben."

She often sounded so much like Maggie that I was inclined to agree with her. "Can you come over tomorrow and talk to him?"

"Right after lunch."

I left Caroline teasing April with the peacock feather and walked home humming to myself. I was immensely relieved about Ben's problem being solved and the April problem began to fade into the background.



Chapter 8 ~ Cat Stories

The next morning, I certainly didn't feel like humming. Or smiling. I was either gritting my teeth or swearing under my breath. Ben was in such a foul mood that he was almost unbearable. I knew part of the reason for his grumpiness was because he didn't feel well, but that knowledge didn't make his grumping any easier to take.

He went back to bed after breakfast but, instead of lying down and going back to sleep, he sat up, propped against his pillow, and moaned and bitched and grouched. His furry nursing staff paid no attention, leaving it up to me to respond to his complaints.

"This is never going to end, is it?" he demanded.

"Dr. Giles told you to rest for at least four weeks. It's only been nine days so far."

"Well, it feels like forever," Ben snapped. "I'm not going to spend the rest of my life like this. I'll shoot myself first."

"You just have another 21 days to go."

Ben snorted. This startled Poppy, who was trying to perch on his shoulder, and she peered at his face, obviously wondering what was wrong. He ignored her and said, "Why me? Why didn't I get this as a kid, like everybody else? It's probably my mother's fault."

"How can you blame it on Maggie?"

"She was always telling Dave and me to wash our hands and stuff like that. She was being way too careful." He shifted the pillow behind his back, knocking Poppy completely off her perch.

"Why are you getting so upset? What good does it do?"

"It makes me feel better."

"Really! Do you enjoy being short-tempered and impatient? You're worse now than when you broke your arm."

Poppy tried to climb into his lap, but Ben pushed her off. "I'm frustrated and angry and I have every right to be! I have a business that's going to tank for sure if I don't get out there and look after those plants." He slammed his fist down on the bed.

I opened my mouth to say something cutting, but Ming beat me to it.

My sweet, gentle, 20-pound cat, who'd once gone bald from stress because he couldn't herd his six kittens into a group small enough for him to manage, marched up Ben's legs. Then he reached out and bit Ben's forefinger. Hard.

Ben yelped and yanked his hand away. He stared at Ming, his mouth open. "This cat bit me!"

"I don't blame him. I'd bite you, too, if I thought it would do any good."

"He was telling me off!" Ben still looked amazed. Then two tears rolled down his cheeks.

"He did the same thing to George when Henry died."

After Henry, my beloved Buddhist cat died, George had grieved for weeks. He'd stopped eating and I was terrified we would lose our little King as well. Then Ming walked over to him one day and casually bit him on the ear. George didn't even fight back, and I was totally convinced it was the end for him. But, twenty minutes later, he was in the kitchen, eating. He'd been fine ever since.

"I think he was telling you to live in the moment and not fuss about things," I said. "That's how cats manage their lives."

"You really believe that?"

"I do."

"Okay." Ben slid down under the blankets and turned his back to me.

"Listen, Ben, I have a solution for the business. I didn't tell you last night because you were already in bed and asleep when I got home."

A muffled, "Yeah, sure!" came from the pillow.

"I'm serious. Caroline will come over and look after the plants for you."

Ben lifted his head. "But she's a scientist. What the hell would she know about plants? She doesn't even have a flower garden."

I decided Caroline could explain herself to Ben when she arrived. I was sick of being the understanding, accommodating wife, always trying to smooth things over. "She'll tell you when she gets here," I said. "I've asked her to come over right after lunch."

"Mmmff."

"Go to sleep. Ming will stand guard over you. And I will encourage him to bite you again if you don't behave."

Silence.



Caroline's arrival at one o'clock was announced by Nicky and BJ having a little bark session, no doubt ecstatic about the prospects of having someone new to play with. I brought her, minus the dogs, into the kitchen, where Ben sat at the table, doing his best to look alert and masterful.

She assessed him with one quick glance and stuck her hand out. "I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Sutton."

"Ben," he said. "Call me Ben." He wasn't used to anybody older than a teenager calling him Mr. Sutton.

"I understand you could do with help in the garden and greenhouse for the next few weeks."

"What do you know about gardening?" Ben asked. "You don't even have a flower garden at your place."

She smiled. "I spent so much time in my parents' greenhouse, digging and weeding and hoeing and up to my elbows in dried steer manure that I didn't want to commit myself to doing it for the rest of my life." She went on to explain the extent of her experience with market gardening.

Ben was now looking hopeful rather than masterful. "Well, it certainly sounds as if you know what you're doing. Did you learn any of the biology?"

"For a start, I can tell you how plants make sugar and oxygen from carbon dioxide and sunlight." She waved her hand at the sunlight streaming in through the sliding glass doors. "The huge amount of light energy coming from the sun means that there are green plants almost everywhere on the planet, from a thin veneer of moss on a brick wall to the luxuriant architecture of a rainforest."

I slid a cup of coffee next to Caroline's hand and moved the plate of peanut butter cookies closer to her.

"Each leaf," she said, "is the support structure for layers of chlorophyll-stuffed cells, each one a tiny molecular factory turning sunlight and carbon dioxide into sugar, which is food for the plant, and oxygen, which is necessary to sustain our own lives."

"How do the little factories work?" I asked, hoping to forestall Ben, who looked as if he might say something. I didn't want him to interrupt the science lesson.

Caroline continued. "Just a small fraction of the energy from the flood of light washing over each leaf is captured and stashed away as sugar. Even on a calm sunny day, in a field where everything looks still and unchanging, the plants are busy. One molecule at a time, they are producing the oxygen that we breathe, enough to keep all the other living things on Earth alive, enough to maintain an atmosphere that is 21 per cent oxygen."

"When I look at trees or grass or potato plants in the sunlight," I said, "they look as if they're merely basking."

"The molecular machines are so tiny you could never see them working," Caroline said. "But they work all the time, like a little green army that keeps us breathing."

Ben finally got a word in. "I know that greenhouse operators all over the world inject additional carbon dioxide into their greenhouse in order to increase the growth and yield of their crops. I was planning to start doing that myself this spring."

"That's a good idea," Caroline said. "It can increase growth by 40 per cent or even more. The optimum level of carbon dioxide for plant growth is between 1,000 and 3,000 parts per million in the atmosphere. That's much higher than the 400 parts per million that we have in the global atmosphere today."

"I've read about that," Ben said. "I also read that all of us, every species on earth, is descended from ancestors that thrived in climates with much higher levels of carbon dioxide than we have now."

Caroline nodded. "That's true. In fact, carbon dioxide has been as high as 7,000 parts per million."

She hadn't eaten any of the cookies, and I pushed the plate closer.

"No, thanks," she said. "I just had lunch." She glanced around. "Where are your six cats?"

"They've gone outside," I said. "Whenever Ben gets up for a meal, they take the opportunity to check on their farm territory, which usually includes going up to the end of the driveway to get their p-mail from the cedar shrub there."

"P-mail?" Caroline looked puzzled. Then she smiled. "I think I understand what you mean. Various cats pee on the shrub and yours can tell who they were by the smell."

Ben rose. "Caroline, would you like to come and look at my plants? We can talk about what needs to be done."

"Perhaps you should take a chair, Ben," I suggested. "You might need to take a quick rest. How about one of the Muskoka chairs from the front veranda?"

He shook his head. "Way too heavy to carry," he said. "There's a canvas folding chair in the carport. I'll get that."

I watched them go through the gate into the garden with Caroline carrying the folding chair, and heaved a big sigh of relief as I went to deal with the lunch dishes. It had been a hellish ten days, but maybe the worst was over. Caroline probably couldn't be bullied and, anyway, Ben was too tired to try. At least, he couldn't accuse her of having black thumbs.

I was hanging up the dish towel when Duff phoned.

"I've talked to Dorothea and Fred," Duff said. "By the way, she likes to be called Thea."

"So, what do they say about Sybil?"

"Thea says she can't see that there's anything wrong with her mother. Her physical health seems good. Sybil hasn't said anything about the feral colony except that the cats should all be destroyed, but Thea says that attitude is nothing new."

"Why am I not surprised?" I sighed. "Have they found out if Sybil has any substance that would kill cats?"

"Fred looked around but didn't find anything. Thea says they'll stay another couple of weeks and take care of a few things for the old lady, but after that, they're going back to Vancouver."

"I wish they wouldn't," I said. "I have this feeling that Sybil has something evil in mind but is too smart to let on."

"Come on, Holly," Duff said, "you're getting paranoid."

"Did Thea say whether she'd argued with her mother's opinion that the ferals should be destroyed?"

Duff paused. "As a matter of fact, she did. I'd forgotten that. But she also said that Sybil has a very thick skin, and no amount of argument would ever change her mind. She didn't push it."

"About what I thought," I said.

"I have another apt fact for you," Duff said. "The average person's skin weighs twice as much as the brain. So, if Sybil has thick skin, perhaps her skin weighs four times as much as her brain."

"If she even has a brain," I said. It wasn't a nice thing to say, but I knew Duff wouldn't repeat it. Besides, Sybil was not a nice person.

Duff hung up before I remembered to tell him to tell Thea that if all the feral cats were destroyed, the area would likely become infested with rats. Sybil might not like cats, but I could darn near guarantee that she'd dislike rats a whole lot more than cats.



Ben and Caroline came back into the house just before three o'clock. He looked exhausted and I said, "I think you should lie down for the rest of the afternoon."

He didn't protest but disappeared into the bedroom, where most of his nurses were asleep on the bed, waiting for him. Only George had been on guard duty, and he followed Ben, making little trilling sounds as encouragement.

"Are you ready for tea or coffee and some cookies?" I asked Caroline.

"Tea and one cookie," she replied. "Then I must go home and brush April. She demands a brushing every afternoon and I want to see if she keeps up that routine." Caroline smiled ruefully. "I had no idea cats could be this demanding."

"When you do something they like," I said, "it immediately becomes a four-hundred-year-old tradition."

Caroline rolled her eyes. "I understand why you say that. When she sees me pick up the brush, she purrs loudly, making a sort of bubbling sound. And yesterday, when I was a few minutes later than usual, she raced from one end of the house to the other, yelling her head off. I thought she was playing, but as soon as I went to grab the brush, she rushed over to me and started that bubbling purr."

I had made tea and put the cookies back on the table. "She was trying to get your attention. It takes a while to understand what they're saying."

"The odd thing is," said Caroline, "that the brush seems too big and heavy for a cat. It has metal bristles and I thought those would hurt her."

"Do they have plastic tips?"

Caroline nodded.

"Then the brush is fine for her. I noticed that she has extremely thick fur. You can imagine how good it must feel to her when you pull a brush through that fur, ruffling it up and giving her skin a good scratch. Especially if you brush her spine in both directions."

"She certainly acts as if she loves it," Caroline said. "She's done a couple of other things I don't understand. I left an empty cardboard box on the floor last week, while I was putting away some things, and she climbed in and settled down. I tried to take her out, but she seemed to suddenly gain fifty pounds."

I laughed. "Cats love empty boxes. They're always intent on protecting themselves, and they feel secure in confined spaces. A box is exactly that. If you leave it out for her to play with or sleep in, she'll be very happy. What else has she done?"

"She sits in front of the glass sliding doors and chirps at birds outside. Well, it's sort of a chirp, but also as if she's clacking her teeth."

"That's the sound I call a 'chitter.' But she is actually clicking her teeth together. Cats instinctively bite a bird or animal on the back of the neck, to break the spine for a quick death. When April can't get at the bird, she may do this because she's instinctively getting ready to pounce, or because she's frustrated that she can't pounce."

Caroline nodded. "I don't suppose we'll know the answer until science comes up with more sophisticated ways of testing animals."

"Or until we learn to speak 'cat.' I'll explain some of the other body language cats use. If April rolls back and forth on the floor, she's showing submission or inviting you to play."

"She hasn't done that yet," Caroline said. "What else?"

"If she sticks a raised butt in your face, she's saying hello. Tail sniffing is normal in the cat world."

Caroline laughed. "Thanks for the warning!"

"Another one I remember is cats sleeping curled up in a circle. They do that, and also tuck their paws under their bodies, to conserve body heat."

"I noticed that," Caroline said, "and I thought it was probably about keeping warm."

"Does April talk a lot?"

"No. She always has a few things to tell me in the morning, but she's pretty quiet the rest of the day."

"You're lucky," I said. "My purebred Siamese, Kaylie, has been known to burst into song at three in the morning and sing to her Slinky toy for an hour. I have to assume she's enjoying herself, but I can't say the same for the rest of us."

Caroline rose. "I'm glad April isn't a Siamese! I must be on my way. I don't want April to have a tantrum and start clawing the furniture. I suppose I could get a scratching post, but that seems pointless if I'm not going to keep her."

"If you get one," I said, crossing my fingers, "rub some catnip on it."

"That would please both her inner and outer princesses." Caroline agreed that she would be back in the morning to do the work she and Ben had agreed on, and left me worrying yet again about April's fate.



Several days slid sweetly by, with Caroline in the greenhouse for a few hours each day. Ben would go out with her for a little while and they'd discuss what had to be done. Sometimes he sat in the folding chair and talked with her but, now that his plants were being properly babied, he seemed content to come back in and rest after an hour or so. When a delivery had to be made to Duff's store, I was delighted to do it.

Relieved and re-energized by Caroline solving the problem of Ben being a workaholic, I got

on with chores, errands, and assorted cat projects. On Sunday, Maggie and I, with Harry's and Cal's help, did another cat trapping. Monday afternoon, as usual, we delivered the neutered felines back to the colony.

"We're getting good at this," I said to Maggie when we got home.

"I'm waiting for something to go wrong," she said. "Surely we won't always have it this easy. There must be cats with kittens hiding in the brush."

I'd explained that the colony might be so inbred that we wouldn't find kittens, though I still hoped for some. "Well, Jerry did find some ear mites and fleas this time. And a couple of them showed signs of kidney disease." I'd walked back to her house with her, so I could say hello to Doran and Shaz. Naturally, they ignored me.

Maggie smiled at my disappointment. "You've never been truly ignored until you've been ignored by a cat. Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I must get home and make dinner for Ben." When I got inside, I found he was sitting at the kitchen table.

"Holly, I've done as much as I can on those application forms for Zephyrus. Would you phone her, please? I have a couple of questions and then she needs to sign the forms before I can mail them."

I called her after dinner, but before her usual time for feeding the ferals. "I can come and get you," I said.

"No need. Jimmy offered to take me into Mora Bay tomorrow to buy cat litter and he could drop me off at your place."

The next morning, *The Garden Guys'* pickup rolled down the driveway at 9:30. Jimmy and Zephyrus both came in. She handed me a casserole.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Oh, my dear, just a little pasta dish for your dinner. Tuna, macaroni, and cheese. You've done so much for me, and I know you must be terribly busy."

I took it from her, fighting the sudden tears I could feel forming. It was so kind of her, so thoughtful, especially when I knew she didn't have enough money to feed herself properly, never mind anybody else. I swallowed the tears, thanked her, and resisted the temptation to say, 'You shouldn't have!' Then gave her a big hug. She looked pleased.

Jimmy said, "Can I go have a look at the garden, Ben? I'd like to see the layout."

I knew Ben wanted to go with him and show off his empire, but he decided to be sensible about how he spent his energy.

"Go ahead," Ben said. "Introduce yourself to Caroline, who's working out there. She's our next-door neighbor and quite a gardener."

"Thanks!" Jimmy said. "And I know Caroline. She's helped Zephyrus feed the ferals a couple of times. I'll only take time for a quick look; I must get to Mora Bay to pick up some supplies off the early ferry." He looked at me. "Can you take Zeph there to get some cat litter?"

I said I'd take her anywhere she needed to go, and Jimmy happily went off to inspect Ben's realm. Ben sat down with Zephyrus, and I decided to do some housework.

Half an hour later, I heard Ben calling. He sounded in a panic.

I rushed into the kitchen. "What's wrong?" Ben was standing up, but leaning on the table. Zephyrus had her head down on it.

Zephyrus raised her head. "I had a dizzy spell. I'm okay now." She looked at Ben's worried face. "Really. I'm fine. Don't worry about it. I quite often get these little spells, and I always get over them."

I didn't want to leave it at that. Her face was pale and, when she rose, she seemed shaky.

Ben said, "We've finished the forms." He handed me a sealed envelope. "Maybe you could mail this when you're in Mora Bay."

"Maybe you could just take me home instead," Zephyrus said.

"No," I said. "I'll take you to town. You can stay in the car while I get the cat litter, and anything else you need. Percy and Pru and Little Cat will be very upset if you run out of litter."

"They aren't the only ones!" Zephyrus said.

On the way into Mora Bay, she said, "I have to tell you the latest story about Percy and Pru. They're little scamps."

I was glad she was talking. It must mean she was feeling better. "What have they done now?"

"I have this little desk lamp on the kitchen table," she said. "I usually have it on at night, so I can see to do things in the kitchen. It uses less electricity than the overhead lights. The other night, I was in the living room, reading, and I noticed the light kept going on and off."

I could guess what was coming.

"When I went out to find out what was the matter with the lamp, Percy and Pru were politely taking turns batting at the lamp chain. They were so funny I couldn't scold them."

"Of course, you couldn't," I said. "By the way, how is Little Cat doing?"

"It's amazing! She's fine. She uses the litter box every time, and she seems much more content." Zephyrus sighed. "I wish I'd taken her to Jerry much sooner."

"What's done is done," I said, "and it ended well." I went on to tell her a few funny stories about my feline six-pack, finishing off with one that still made me laugh when I thought of it. "One night Ben and I spent the evening in the pub in Mora Bay, something we don't often do. When we came home, we checked on the cats, but we couldn't find Caesar. He was one of Kaylie's and Ming's kittens, about two months old at the time, I think. We called and called, but he didn't come."

"I'll bet he got locked in a closet," Zephyrus said.

"That's what we thought, too, but it was Ben who found him and called me to come and look. You'll never guess! Caesar was sitting on his haunches in the litter box, half a turd sticking out of his bum, and his head resting on the edge of the box. He was sound asleep!"

Zephyrus laughed. "What happened when you woke him up?"

"He wasn't at all concerned. He blinked, then finished his toilet business. Then he wandered off to find his siblings."

"Like all babies, I guess. He must have played so hard he couldn't stay awake."

By this time, we were in Mora Bay. I quickly did Zephyrus's errands, then drove to Dr. Giles's office.

"What are we doing here?" Zephyrus asked.

"I hope you're not going to be upset with me," I said, "but I'd like Dr. Giles to have a look at you. How long since you've seen a doctor?"

"Years!" Zephyrus said. "I'm all right, Holly, I promise." She gave me a long look and I guess she could see by my expression that I wouldn't give in. Or perhaps Ben had told her that I could be obstinate. "All right, if you insist. But it won't do any good."

We waited half an hour, filling in the time with more stories. Then Dr. Giles appeared, and I told him about Zephyrus's dizzy spell. He took her away into his office.

When they emerged half an hour later, Zephyrus said to Dr. Giles, "You can tell Holly what you told me. Otherwise, she'll worry."

It hadn't taken her long to figure out my weakness!

Dr. Giles knew, too. "Holly worries about everything." He looked at me. "Nothing serious. Zephyrus has congestive heart failure, which is not surprising at her age."

"But that sounds scary!"

Dr. Giles said, "I know it does. But what it means, basically, is that her heart is getting old and weak. It's still working, but not as well as it used to."

"Like the rest of my body," Zephyrus said tartly. "What do you expect? I'm ninety-two, after all."

"And you're in damn good shape for your age," the doctor said, with a smile.

"I didn't know that's what dizzy spells meant," I said.

"Quite often they don't mean that at all," Dr. Giles said. "There are many reasons for a person to feel light-headed or dizzy." He looked at Zephyrus. "Did you eat breakfast?"

She looked guilty. "Um, no."

"That's a good reason right there for a dizzy spell," he said. "Make sure you eat at least a little something in the morning. But, if you start feeling breathless, or having fatigue, irregular heartbeat, or rapid weight gain, come back to see me."

I thanked Dr. Giles for seeing Zephyrus so quickly and assured him that Ben was behaving himself. Then I insisted that we go to The Yellow Duck for lunch. She objected, of course, but I said we should celebrate the fact that she was in good shape. Anyway, she looked much happier when she had one of Mitch's cheeseburgers inside her, and we talked about the ferals all the way back to her place.

On the way home, I started wondering if the *Adriana Cat Rescue* should speed up the rescue of the colony. According to my calculations, we still had nine trappings to do, which would take two months.

Well, maybe I did worry too much, but somebody had to do it. That might be a cliché, but sometimes clichés were true. I'd talk to Maggie about more trappings.



Chapter 9 ~ Cats in Danger

Two weeks flew by and, on a rainy Tuesday morning, Maggie and I sat down to have a conference about Zephyrus's colony of cats. We didn't worry about excluding Duff and Shelly because they were both working. If we came to any startling conclusions, of course we would call an official meeting. In a congenial location, of course, hopefully one which would provide double chocolate chunk muffins.

"Do you think we should speed up the trapping? It's already May 19th," I said.

Ten days before, we'd caught a nursing female and, luckily, stumbled across her six kittens in a nest, too young to run away. There was no question about the two captures belonging to one another; all the kittens were identical to the female. The mother cat was so ill that Jerry had no option but to euthanize her. He and his staff tried to save the kittens, but five of them died within hours. The sixth lasted two days, under the constant care of Sally Fraser, who had fallen in love with cats and the idea of rescuing kittens. But the little mite was simply too small and weak to make it.

Maggie pushed the plate of peanut butter cookies a little closer to me. "We don't have a deadline, do we? Have you asked Jerry? What does he say?"

"He'd rather not do more than one batch per week. He's up to his knees in new calves, and goat kids, and lambs, and all the other four-legged babies which appear at this time of year."

"I understand that, but doesn't he think that catching them sooner will save more cats?" Maggie asked.

I shook my head. "He says it looks like the colony is inbred, that most of the cats are offspring of the original pair. I asked Zephyrus about it and she's sure that the dominant pair are the ones she calls Rosco and Rosalie. They are, or were, light gray shorthairs with white chests."

Maggie nodded. "And all the ferals we've captured thus far have pretty much the same coloring. Did Zephyrus tell you when she first saw Rosco and Rosalie?"

"About thirty years ago. And she still sees them sometimes. On warm, sunny days, they sit on top of that old Chevy and bask."

"Well, it won't be the originals she sees," said Maggie. "I've heard of cats living to twenty, even twenty-one, but that's about the limit."

Zephyrus would know that, of course, so perhaps it was just her habit to call any gray and white shorthairs Rosco and Rosalie. The ferals would never let her get close enough to find other distinguishing features, or which was Rosco and which Rosalie.

"Well, maybe it isn't important to hurry the trapping," Maggie said. "Though it would be more humane to euthanize the sick cats as quickly as possible."

"You're right, but if Jerry doesn't have time, we can't do anything about that. It's discouraging to keep finding damaged cats, and I'm sure he's not happy about having to euthanize so many of our catches. We trapped five on Sunday and returned three yesterday."

"Why did you manage to trap only five?" Maggie had taken Sunday off in order to help Cal with the design for his new wall hanging.

"We did get six," I said, "but one had a clipped ear and we had to let him go. Or her. I guess he or she really liked our tuna treats. Jerry had to put down two more because of untreatable infections."

"Well," Maggie said, "at least the first six we got were healthy."

We were silent while she poured us each a second cup of tea. I knew she'd been as eager as I

was to find kittens we could help raise and find homes for, to keep the colony from growing.

"Any word from Melody on the grant?" Maggie asked.

"I phoned and asked, but she says not to get impatient, that these applications take time to process. I wrote a check on our account for Jerry yesterday and, so far, Ben hasn't exploded, which means we're okay for a while. I also phoned Shelly and she says the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society* is now an official legal entity."

"Then," Maggie said, "we are actually making progress."

"Of course, we are. Shelly says we have a couple hundred in donations so far. And we're making progress with the colony itself. It's just that the process hasn't always been as happy and rewarding as we hoped it would be."

"Sometimes," Maggie said, with unaccustomed gloom, "life sucks."

Her unaccustomed use of slang startled me. "It does?"

"Well, for cats it does."

Then Shaz, her soft, silky, thick, Ragdoll fur fluffed out around a solid, well-fed body, came trotting in from the bedroom and blinked her blue eyes at us. She rolled over on her back for a tummy rub.

"Some cats, anyway," Maggie said, with a smile. Now she was back to her normal self, briskly pouring more tea. As she bent down to minister to Shaz, she asked, "How did Sally manage the photography of your six royal felines?"

Sally had arrived ten days previously, loaded with camera equipment and enthusiasm. George the Magnificent took one look at her and vanished. In a big house on a five-acre farm, there are a million places for a clever and agile ten-pound cat to hide and I knew better than to try finding him. Of course, he appeared ten minutes after she left, with an expression that seemed to say, "Oh, were you looking for me? Sorry, I was terribly busy this afternoon."

The other five were nearly as bad, confirming the theory that it is impossible to herd cats. Even one cat. Long-legged, white Cato disappeared at the same time as George. I explained to Sally that George ruled the farm and Cato was a politician who idolized George and emulated his every move.

"I'm surprised they're not eager to take advantage of a photo op," she said. "I mean, imagine the publicity! Their photos could be on a wall in almost every house on the island."

"I'd tell them that, but they never listen to me."

Ming seemed to think Sally was playing with him. Every time she stood very still, focusing her camera, he bounced up from wherever he was posing prettily and came over to purr at her. Queen Kaylie, on the other hand, thought Sally was being far too familiar, and insisted on turning her back on such a bad-mannered, invasive human. The two of them went around in circles until Sally gave up.

Poppy allowed herself to be photographed only once before she decided Sally's armpits might smell as good as Ben's and came closer to investigate. Caesar, exhausted from digging a hole in Ben's slipper because he wanted to hide his catnip mouse in it, blinked at her once and fell asleep, sprawled in an untidy heap under the piano bench.

"Do they always run around like drops of mercury?" Sally asked.

"Only when they're in the mood for it. If you have plenty of other cats to photograph, you can ignore my clan."

"I refuse to admit that I can be defeated by a herd of fur-covered clowns," Sally said. "I'd like to try again. I could get some wonderful shots, if they'd consent to stay still, even for five minutes."

We agreed on another date and Sally lugged her equipment back to her car. And, of course, Cato reappeared as soon as she was out of the driveway.



A couple of days later, after Caroline had gone home, Ben came in from the greenhouse and said, "I've told Caroline she doesn't need to come back. I can handle the work now."

I stared at him in consternation. "What makes you think so?"

He looked at me as if I were short in the brains department. "It's been almost a month since I saw Dr. Giles. He said rest for a month, and I have."

"Wouldn't it be wiser to try working one day per week, then maybe two, before you decide?" That question merely netted me a disgusted look.

"I told you; I'm fine. Stop fussing."

I stopped fussing. At least I stopped fussing out loud. I kept telling myself that Ben might be right about his recovery. I told myself that every day for three whole days. I told Maggie that, too, and all she did was to raise her eyebrows and shrug. At the end of the third day, around four-thirty, he came in from the garden, shucked his clothes and crawled into bed. I asked what was wrong.

"Feel awful," he mumbled into his pillow. "Must have caught the flu."

"Yeah, right! Benjamin Sutton, I knew this would happen! Get up; I'm taking you in to see Dr. Giles."

"Not now, I'm too tired. Besides, it's Sunday and he won't be working. There's nothing wrong with me. I'll be fine in a day or two."

Fuming, I conceded the point about it being Sunday. "But we're going tomorrow." I left Ben hugging his pillow and left a message at Dr. Giles' office, saying I'd bring Ben in right after lunch on Monday. If Dr. Giles was busy, we'd just have to wait.

Dr. Giles took one look at Ben's face, scowled, and shoed him into the examination room. When they returned, Ben got a firm lecture.

"I told you to rest," said Dr. Giles.

"I did," Ben protested.

"Not long enough," Giles snapped. "I didn't say, 'a month,' I said, 'at least a month.' And I recall telling you that it might take a lot longer because of your age."

"I'm only twelve in cat years," Ben muttered.

Dr. Giles rolled his eyes. "If you were a cat, I'd be treating you for fleas, not mononucleosis! Now stop assuming you can jump from spending most of your time horizontal to working full time. You will stay in bed for the next week. Then, if you feel up to it, and only if, you can spend an hour a day walking around for the following week. The idea is to gradually return to normal activity."

"But it's costing me a fortune to keep the greenhouse running."

"You won't care about money or the greenhouse if you're dead," Dr. Giles said. "Imagine how much fun Holly will have spending your life insurance pay-out."

Ben moaned.

"Keep resting," Giles said. "And remember, it could be another couple of months before you get over feeling tired."

When we got home, Ben sat down by the telephone in the hall. "I'm going to call David and see what he says about this. Maybe Dr. Giles is wrong." David was Ben's brother, a doctor living

and practicing in Moose Jaw.

Ben was on the phone for barely ten minutes and when he hung up, he looked sheepish. "Dave says I'm an idiot." He headed for the bedroom, and I beamed a mental 'thank-you' toward Moose Jaw.

I followed Ben and told him I was planning on sausages and mash for supper.

"Fine," he mumbled. "Would you phone Caroline and ask her to come back? There are things to be done in both garden and greenhouse, and some produce is nearly ready to deliver to the store."

"Of course." I knew he was too ashamed to ask her himself.

I felt like I needed to get out of the house and go somewhere for some peace and quiet and, especially, some distance from Ben for a little while. So, I decided to walk over to Caroline's. However, I phoned first, to make sure she was okay with having company.

"You'll be getting sick of the Suttons and their problems," I said, when I walked in.

"Not yet. Don't worry; you'll hear about it if I do." Caroline led me into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. She had become, in the short while I'd known her, a true Adriana Islander. Most entertaining was done around the kitchen table, with coffee or tea and cookies. Depending on whose house you were in, there might also be beer and potato chips.

"Let's get the business over with first," I said. "Ben says he's an idiot, and can you please come back to work."

"He thought he could leap tall buildings in a single bound, did he?"

"Something like that." I explained about Ben's collapse and Dr. Giles's lecture.

"Sure," Caroline said, "I'll be over tomorrow morning. Unless things have changed drastically in the last three or four days, I know what needs to be done."

"And, if you don't, it's but a few short steps into the house, where you can ask the master himself." Then, to keep myself from complaining about my husband, who was a thoroughly nice man when he wasn't sick, I said, "How's April doing?"

"Oh, we have a new routine," Caroline said, smiling. "When she first came, I put a small saucer of water on the floor, near her food dish. I gave her fresh water twice a day, too, but she'd come and look at it, then walk away."

"Most cats would be happy with that."

"It took me a little time to work out what she wanted," Caroline said, "and then I hauled my brains out from wherever I'd temporarily filed them and phoned Zephyrus to ask about April's water habits."

"I suspect that after fourteen years, April had Zephyrus well-trained."

Caroline nodded. "Absolutely! I've discovered that April likes to sit on the bathroom counter in the morning while I'm brushing my teeth and washing my face. When I'm done, she puts her front feet in the sink, and licks up the water drops. Now, when I'm brushing my teeth, I let the water run and put little handfuls of water onto the sink ledge and she licks that up."

"Cats are weird."

"I know. She finally got me to understand that I should put the plug in the bathroom sink and leave a couple of inches of water in there for her."

"Does she still use the water on the floor?" I asked.

"I doubt if she ever did," Caroline replied. "I think she just licked up water out of the sink. So I put the little dish away. Oh, and another thing: when I have a shower, she goes into the tub afterward, and licks up water drops. It doesn't seem to matter if the water is hot or cold or tastes of shampoo."

I told her that George and Henry had also liked water in the bathtub, years before. That is, when they weren't lapping it from filthy mud puddles outside.

Caroline chuckled. "You're right about cats being weird. Tell me, why do they stare into space when there's nothing to see?"

"Well," I said, "they're not seeing ghosts, that's for sure. Cats have keen senses, especially sight, and if April is staring at what appears to be nothing, she can probably see a floating speck of dust, or perhaps some insect so small that humans could never see it."

"Of course," Caroline said, "I should have thought of that. I guess I'm so impressed by how clever small four-legged animals can be that I'm inclined to attribute more power to them than they have."

"It's easy to do. You've met Kaylie, my Siamese applehead, the eight-pound queen with the two-ton cattitude."

Caroline nodded.

"When Kaylie was a teenager, she did something bad and Ben said to her, in fun, 'Go to your room!' She ran out of the living room and upstairs, with Ben calling after her, 'And don't you dare slam that door!' Two seconds later, the door slammed! Ben and I looked at each other and burst out laughing."

"You can't mean that she actually slammed a door?"

I smiled. "No. It was a windy fall day, and all the windows and doors in the house were open."

"That's a wonderful story," Caroline said, replenishing our coffee mugs. "I can't match that. Not yet, anyway."

"May I ask you for another science lecture?"

"Feel like being distracted?" Caroline asked.

"No, educated. Well, to be honest, I want to be distracted, too. But I like learning. I wouldn't go back to college, though. Facts seem easier to remember when they come in small bites."

Caroline leaned back in her chair and thought for a minute. "All right, we were talking about things humans can't see. Here's another thing we can't see without help from some amazing equipment: atoms."

"And absolutely everything in the world is made of atoms, right? I remember that much from high school."

"Yes, including gases, like oxygen or nitrogen or water vapor. In one way, atoms are very simple, and there's beauty in simplicity. But there's beauty in complexity, too. For me, the laws that explain how gases behave are like one of those optical illusions where you think you see one thing, and then you blink and look again and see something completely different."

"That doesn't sound very simple."

"I'll start with the basics. An atom is a tiny speck of matter," Caroline went on. "Each of these tiny specks is coated with a distinctive pattern of negatively charged electrons, whirling around the heavy and positively charged nucleus in the center."

"Does that mean atoms are always moving?"

Caroline nodded.

"Even in a rock? I mean, a rock looks absolutely solid. And inert, if that's the right word." I took another chocolate chip cookie to send some energy to the atoms in my brain. "It seems impossible that a rock is made up of tiny specks which are always moving."

"It is hard to imagine, I know," Caroline said, "but it's true. Chemistry is the story of those negatively charged electrons sharing duties between multiple atoms, shifting formations around

while always obeying the strict rules of the quantum world. They hold the captive nuclei in larger patterns called molecules."

"Oh yes, I remember now. Okay, atoms form into molecules."

Caroline smiled. "If you find the idea of a rock being made up of tiny moving specks hard to believe, you'll find these facts even harder to believe."

"I'll try."

"All right. The air we're breathing contains pairs of oxygen atoms. Each pair is one oxygen molecule. These oxygen atoms are moving at 900 miles per hour and bumping into pairs of nitrogen atoms going at 200 miles per hour, and then maybe bouncing off a water molecule going at over 1,000 miles per hour."

I blinked. "That really is hard to imagine, especially because the air in this room feels absolutely still."

"Because of our limited human senses," Caroline said, "it certainly does seem still, which makes the knowledge of what is actually happening almost magical. And it's extremely messy and complicated — different atoms, different molecules, different speeds. and in each cubic centimeter of air there are about thirty million million million individual molecules."

Shaking my head, I said, "I can't deal with numbers like that."

Caroline smiled again but looked sympathetic. "I don't know if it will help, but that's 30 followed by 18 zeros. Each molecule collides with another about a billion times a second."

"I may have developed a whole new attitude toward breathing."

"As long as you don't stop," Caroline said. "You may be thinking that the sensible approach to all this is to take up brain surgery or economic theory or hacking supercomputers instead. Something simpler, anyway."

"That hadn't occurred to me." I laughed. "But it would have. It certainly makes me realize what a simple life I lead."

"That may be why I'm so fascinated by April. In terms of animals, she's quite a complicated little creature, yet in terms of the hard sciences, she's simple. She's certainly easier on the brain than quantum mechanics."

"And you can pet her," I said, deciding it was time to be silly. "And she purrs."

Caroline frowned. "April is not what I'd thought she'd be as a house pet. She seems quite particular about when she'll accept my touching her. And she simply will not sit in my lap. Sometimes, she'll sleep on the bed, but she won't cuddle." A pause. "Well, at least she's not a bed hog."

"Perhaps she needs to get to know you better. And most of all, to trust you."

"Perhaps. But it doesn't matter. I've enjoyed observing her." She paused. "Have you found a home for her yet?"

"No, not yet." I wondered if Caroline would change her mind about keeping April if the cat were less standoffish. I didn't want to suggest that, though, in case it pushed Caroline into making the wrong decision. I thought it was time for me to leave and I made a move to get up.

Caroline, however, wasn't quite finished with her science lecture. "By the way, the idea of atoms wasn't actually an accepted part of science until the early 1800s and absolute proof of their existence didn't turn up until around 1905."

"And you've learned all those facts in just the last hundred plus years?"

"With some incredibly sophisticated technology," Caroline said.

"This has been fascinating. But I suppose I'd better get back to work. I must phone Jerry and get his report on what happened to those six ferals we captured last night."

"I've been wondering, too. Trapping them the way we do is like getting Christmas presents and not being allowed to open them."

"I know. We don't see what we've caught because of the blankets covering the cages, and we get nothing but a quick glimpse next day when the cat leaps out and dives into the underbrush. Jerry's the only one who gets to see the whole picture." I rose. "I'll phone and let you know what Jerry says after I've talked to him."

"Come back any time for more science," Caroline said. "I'd say it's a fair trade for the cat lore you're teaching me."

At home, I called Jerry and discovered he was happy with the new batch. "They're all in good shape," he said. "Three males and three females, with the usual gray and white markings. But like some of the others, these were older cats, probably around twelve or thirteen, maybe more."

I thanked him for his work, phoned Caroline with the news, and phoned Maggie to say we had six healthy cats to return to the colony after five o'clock. That made her happy and I could tell by the lilt in her voice that she'd decided life for feral cats—at least some feral cats—might be pretty good after all.



Life rolled along smoothly for the next two weeks, including two more successful cat captures and releases, though out of those twelve cats, the two youngest had to be euthanized. To my amazement, Ben behaved himself by resting, while Caroline cheerfully weeded and hoed and harvested.

"I'm enjoying it," she said. "Far more than I thought I would. I might create a garden of my own after all, though I really don't want to commit to something that ties me down."

But on Wednesday, Duff phoned and said he had bad news. That destroyed my hope that life would go on running smoothly. He wouldn't tell me what the problem was, but said we could talk over coffee when I brought the next load of vegetables into the store. I glanced at the calendar. The next day was June 11th and I had to go into Mora Bay for a hair cut, so Duff and I agreed on coffee at ten o'clock.

I went out to the greenhouse to tell Caroline I'd be taking whatever vegetables were ready to town in the morning. I was surprised to find Ben standing beside her as they examined the latest crop of radishes. He must have slipped out of the house while I was upstairs searching for Ming, who wasn't in his usual spot, staring out the glass doors leading to the deck off the kitchen.

Ben looked guilty the minute he saw me. "I'm not working! I'm just spending an hour out here, like Dr. Giles said I could."

His enthusiasm for getting back to work and killing himself did not make me happy but, on the other hand, the greenhouse and garden comprised his kingdom and I knew that being in it made him happy. The three of us discussed what could be harvested and Caroline said she'd start picking. Ben started to say something, then looked at my face.

"I'd better go lie down," he said, then stopped. "Oh, by the way, Ming is outside. I think he's hiding under the cedar by the kitchen deck." We watched Ben walk through the gate and into the house, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Why does Ming hide?" Caroline asked.

"As a kitten, he was attacked by a family of birds, and now he's terrified of anything with wings. You'll almost never see him out in the open."

"Another weird cat!"

"Oh, they all have different characters," I said. "Exactly like humans."

"Don't worry about Ben," Caroline said. "I did some research on mono and I can tell now, by the look of Ben's face, when he's tired. When he is, I'll send him back to the house."

Well, she was enough like Maggie that she'd likely have no problem with that, so I turned my mind to other things, like finding more boxes for her to fill.

Next morning, I left for Mora Bay at 9:30, worrying the whole way about Duff's bad news. Had the SPCA denied our grant request? Had Sybil done something really awful? Was something wrong with Duff himself? But, first things first: I delivered the groceries, and Duff and I walked across the lot to the coffee shop.

When our coffees and double chocolate chunk muffins were set before us, I said, "Okay, let's have it. What's gone wrong?"

"So far, nothing," Duff said. "And, with any luck, nothing will."

"Duff!"

He took a bite of muffin. "I had a long chat with Thea yesterday."

"I knew it! What's Sybil done?"

"She didn't succeed in what she set out to do," Duff said, "and I am very grateful to Thea and Fred, because they caught her."

"Trying to poison the feral cats?"

Duff shook his head. "No. Much worse than that. What happened was that Thea woke up night before last, about two a.m. She wasn't sure what woke her, but she got up to check on things. Sybil wasn't in her bed, in the bathroom, or anywhere else in the house."

I realized I was holding my breath.

"So, Thea woke Fred, and they grabbed a couple of flashlights and went looking for Sybil outside. They figured she might head for Zephyrus's place, so that's where they looked."

"And?"

"Luckily, they caught up to her before she reached Zephyrus's house. Sybil was carrying a can of gasoline in one hand and a box of kitchen matches in the other. She was muttering, 'Burn them out! Burn them all out!'"

For a moment, I couldn't think of anything to say. All I could see in my mind's eye was Zephyrus's house on fire, with her and three cats inside it. That would spread to the over-stuffed garage and to the dry brush and trees beyond. The feral cats might survive the fire, but they would have lost their territory. And Zephyrus would have lost her life.

Duff reached over and patted my hand. "Close call, huh? They got Sybil just in time. And she fought, too. She kept saying it was time she took her revenge. But they got her back into her own house."

"Did Zephyrus wake up? Did she know what was happening?" I could imagine how frightening that would have been for her.

"Apparently not," Duff said. "There were no lights on in her place and she didn't open the door or anything."

"I hope Thea and Fred put the gasoline somewhere that Sybil couldn't find it."

"Oh, yes, and they've been watching her ever since, in four-hour shifts."

"They won't be able to keep that up," I said, "but if they get too tired, I hope they can give her something to knock her out for a few hours."

"Thea was in town yesterday, talking to Dr. Giles about getting a prescription. She came to see me afterward."

"Have they decided what to do about Sybil?"

Duff nodded. "They have to put her into care. She certainly can't be left unsupervised. But they're still debating about whether to try for a care home here or take her to Vancouver. Along with that, they're trying to decide whether to put her property up for sale, or whether to sell their Vancouver house and move over here themselves."

"I guess that last question will depend on the answer to the first."

"So you see, Holly, you didn't need to worry about Sybil poisoning the cats." There was a twinkle in Duff's eyes.

I groaned. "I never thought of worrying that she might set fire to something."

"I wasn't worrying about either possibility," said Duff. "And I have a couple of facts that might partially explain that. For one thing, a woman's heart beats faster than a man's. For another, women blink twice as often as men. So obviously you women live faster and think faster than men do, and that's why you worry twice as much as any man I've ever met."

"It's nice to be so talented," I said, and ate a bite of my muffin. "But it sure takes a lot of energy."

Duff smiled. "A good thing you got that muffin then. I'm sure you're worrying in at least quadruple time with Ben being laid up."

I leaned back. "You know, I believe I'm getting tired of worrying. It didn't do any good with Sybil."

"On the contrary. If you hadn't been worrying about her poisoning the ferals, I wouldn't have phoned her daughter. And if I hadn't phoned, Thea wouldn't have come over here, and Sybil might have succeeded in starting a very tragic fire."

I thought about that for a minute. "Oh, all right. I guess worrying does have some good points."

"I have another interesting fact for you," Duff said. "There are more than 10 million bricks in the Empire State Building."

For a minute, I tried to connect that fact to something familiar, but failed. "Duff, what am I supposed to do with that information?"

He grinned and shrugged. "I don't know. But you could worry about it on your way home."



Chapter 10 ~ Rich Cats

In mid-July, some five weeks later, Zephyrus phoned to say that she'd finally received the check from Veterans Affairs for her back pension.

"Oh, Holly, I'm so excited!" Before I could say anything, she added, "Yes, I know they sent that letter a month ago, saying they'd pay me. But I didn't believe it then."

I knew what she'd received wasn't a fortune but amounted to only a few thousand dollars. "That's wonderful! We'll have to celebrate."

"I'd love to celebrate," Zephyrus said. "I'll have money in the bank, and I feel so rich that I want to spend some of it. I can buy new jeans, and I can even buy a better brand of cat food for my family of ferals. And the cats are rich, too!"

"Everybody will be delighted for you. Would you like me to come and get you, so you can deposit the money in your bank account?" She hadn't said it, but I knew she'd also be able to buy a better brand of human food for herself.

"No need," Zephyrus chirped. "Zack and Jimmy are here and they'll drive me into Mora Bay. Could you meet us at the bank?"

Since there was only one bank in Mora Bay, this did not present a problem in logistics. "Of course." I glanced at the clock above the kitchen counter. Eleven-thirty. Perfect timing. "In about twenty minutes?"

"Yes," Zephyrus said. "Then we'll decide where to go for lunch. And this time, I'm paying for it!"

She sounded so exhilarated that I didn't argue with her. Then decided I shouldn't argue with her. It would do a world of good for her self-respect to return some of what Zack and Jimmy had done for her.

I went out to the greenhouse to tell Ben about it. He had actually been behaving himself for the past five weeks, and working no more than half-days, phoning to ask Caroline for help when he needed to. It seemed like a minor miracle that he was managing to control his stubborn pride and I certainly wasn't going to argue with that, either.

"I'm glad I was able to help Zephyrus," he said. "And no, I won't come with you. It would make too long a day for me, and I'd rather be here for the rest of the morning. I'll come and have lunch with her some other time."

We had received some money recently, too. The grant from the SPCA had come through and I'd written a check on the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society's* account to cover what Ben and I had paid out in vet fees. I thought, as I changed into clean slacks and shirt, that what was left in the account wouldn't cover much more in the way of such fees, but we were getting more donations now. And fewer captures.

I parked behind *The Garden Guys* pickup in front of the bank, just as Zephyrus, Jimmy and Zack came out. They came around to my side of the Jeep and I said, "And where are we having lunch? The Apple Tree?"

Zack shook his head. "I vote for The Yellow Duck. I work at The Apple Tree, you know, and I'm a little tired of fancy food. I want one of Mitch's humongous cheeseburgers."

"Me, too," said Zephyrus. She looked as excited as she'd sounded on the phone. Her gray hair was tousled, and her eyes sparkled.

Jimmy and I agreed and, a few minutes later, the four of us walked into The Yellow Duck in time to grab a window seat overlooking the small harbor and boat moorage. Not many boats

were moored. On such a sunny July day, lots of people would be out fishing.

"Isn't this wonderful!" Zephyrus exclaimed. "I haven't been in The Yellow Duck for I don't know how long."

When the boys and I ordered beers, Zephyrus smiled happily. "Me, too!" she said.

I was prepared to bet that she hadn't had a beer in a long time either, but it didn't seem appropriate to comment. For a few minutes, we talked about the happy event of her pension check and then she told us a few stories about her time in the Royal Canadian Air Force. But, by the time the cheeseburgers arrived, we were back to the usual subject.

"How are the kittens doing?" Zephyrus asked.

We'd managed to capture five kittens that Jerry said were healthy and they were now at the SPCA, awaiting adoption. "They're fine," I said, "and if you want to visit them, we can take you over there after lunch."

Zephyrus shook her head. "Thanks, but I won't. If I see or touch them, I'll want to take them all home and that's not a good idea. Three cats in the house keep me busy enough. Are they all gray and white?"

"Yes," I said. "Cute little guys, though they're still a bit unsure whether humans are going to pet them or eat them."

"They need a little more time, and a lot more interaction with us big two-legged monsters," Jimmy said. "Zack and I are considering adopting one ourselves."

Zephyrus looked pleased. Then she frowned. "Is that a good idea? You're right next door and the kitten might wander into the colony and want to stay."

"Not going to happen," Zack said. "If we adopt a kitten, it will be an inside cat."

"I can just see it now," I said. "The kitten will be pampered and you two will be slaves for the rest of its life."

Jimmy grinned. "Do you hear either of us complaining?"

"Zephyrus," I said, "how do you think we're doing with the colony? The last two trappings have each caught three ferals with clipped ears. I'm wondering if we've nearly trapped them all."

"You might have," she said, frowning. "I haven't seen any cats without clipped ears for the last week or so. But you're not going to stop, are you?"

Maggie and I had discussed that question and decided we would keep on setting traps until at least two trappings produced nothing but already neutered or spayed cats. After that, we'd have to rely on Zephyrus to tell us if she saw any cats with normal ears. I relayed all of this to Zephyrus.

"Oh, I'm glad," she said. "I want the cats to be healthy and happy. I don't want them to produce anymore weak kittens." She finished the last bite of her hamburger. "By the way, I haven't seen Sybil around lately. Or her daughter and husband. Do you know if they're away?"

I understood her concern. "I'm sure you don't have to worry about Sybil poisoning the cats. She's in Vancouver with Thea and Fred. They're trying to get her into a care home there." No one had told her about Sybil's attempt at arson. I guess we all figured that was one thing she didn't need to know. And I didn't want to even raise the subject of Sybil in case I let something slip.

Zephyrus looked relieved. "Well, that's the icing on the cake, isn't it?" she said, with a grin. "Now I don't have anything at all to worry about." She paused. "No, wait a minute, I still have one thing I need to take care of. Who's going to look after the colony when I die?"

"We will," I said. "The *Adriana Cat Rescue Society* will make sure they're fed and taken care of."

"And we will, too," said Jimmy.

"I know you will," Zephyrus said, and sighed. "You do too much, you two." She looked sad now. "But I need the help. I've lost strength this past year and I can't do as much as I used to. What I'm really afraid of is that I'll have to go into care myself, that I'll have to leave the house I've lived in for most of my life." She glanced around at our faces. "Oh, I know what the house looks like. It looks like a dump, and it is a dump. But I love it."

My heart ached for her. If she loved her mossy, crooked, little dump of a house as much as I loved Holly Haven, every inch of it, having to leave it would hasten her death. Jimmy and Zach looked at each other, then at me, and I knew they understood.

"We'll help as much as we can," I said. "You know Maggie and I are good at organizing things, and we'll work on how to keep you in your house just the same way we'll work on keeping the ferals fed and healthy. So, try not to worry."

Suddenly Zephyrus smiled. "All right, Holly. I know that worrying is your department, and I don't want to intrude on your territory."

At that moment, Mitch came over to see if we wanted another beer and Zephyrus asked him for the bill. Jimmy and Zach made ritual protests, but they knew, as I did, how much it would please her to treat us.

When Mitch brought the bill, Zephyrus handed him the cash, adding a decent tip. Then she smiled at the three of us. "Isn't it wonderful? I'm rich!"



When I arrived home, Nicky and BJ welcomed the car as I rattled down the driveway, bounced around until they got their treats, and went back to lying in the shade of orchard apple trees. Ben was asleep on the bed, with three of his six nurse cats guarding him.

Since everything was peaceful at my house, I thought I might go to Maggie's house and tell her about the lunch with Zephyrus. Naturally, the minute I made that decision, the phone rang.

It was Caroline. "Would you like to come over for coffee? It's been a little while since I had a lesson on felines, and perhaps you'd like one on science."

"I'd love to trade lessons." As I walked the short distance down the road to Caroline's place, I noticed dark clouds piling up in the west. For once, I didn't worry. We needed rain and, if the rain was still coming down when I wanted to go home, I was sure Caroline would have an umbrella I could borrow. On this Wet Coast, everybody had umbrellas.

We settled in the living room, facing east toward the calm blue sea between Adriana and the Coast Mountains. Caroline provided coffee and the obligatory plate of cookies. Ginger snaps this time, one of my favorite kinds.

"I have to tell you something funny about April," Caroline said. "The other morning, she was sitting on the bathroom counter, as usual, and I was sitting on the toilet. Suddenly, I farted. Just a tiny one, which came out as a tiny squeak. April immediately came to life. She searched all over the bathroom, including the shower enclosure, looking for whatever had made that fascinating squeak. Then she insisted on having all the closet doors in the house opened so she could check inside."

I laughed, imagining the scene. "She must have thought it was a mouse."

"I'm sure she did," Caroline said. "For the next two days, she went on checking corners and doing sniff tests."

"Too bad you couldn't do that on command; it would keep her amused."

Caroline smiled. "I don't believe she needs to be amused. She seems quite content to sleep

most of the time. Though I notice she spends some of her waking time trying to organize me. Apparently, I don't sleep as much as she thinks I should."

"Does she keep leading you toward the bedroom?"

"Or the couch." She glanced over at the chair in the corner, where April was curled up like a croissant. "I did a little search on 'cats' on the Web last night and found one fascinating piece of history. In order to enjoy legal status as a hamlet, a Welsh settlement had to include nine buildings, a plow, a kiln, a churn, a bull, a cock, a herdsman, and a cat. If the couple who had the cat separated, the wife got the cat."

"I wonder why."

"I don't know," Caroline said. "I'm wondering something, too. Perhaps you can help me find the answer. I called the mobile cat grooming lady to come and clip April's nails and give her a bath last week. Afterwards, April stalked around the house for a couple of hours, looking annoyed, periodically sitting down to lick herself clean. Why would she do that when she was already clean?"

"I'm guessing that her fur didn't smell right. Maybe she could smell the soap that was used on her. That would mean she had to lick herself all over to get things back to normal. What I do know, from my own research, is that a cat will spend nearly thirty percent of her life grooming herself. And she'll lose almost as much fluid in the saliva while grooming herself as she does through urination."

"Then it's true what I read online about cats not being clean; they're just covered in cat spit."

"I've heard that one before! I try to forget about it, too. Cat fur always feels lovely and soft and dry when I touch it, so perhaps the spit evaporates at once." I wanted to ask Caroline if she'd decided whether or not to keep April, because I wanted to quit worrying about the cat. But I'd have to go on trusting that April was smart enough to capture Caroline's heart.

From outside came a cracking sound, then a deep rumbling. I looked up to see that the black clouds from the west had moved overhead and were rolling east toward the mainland.

"Thunder!" I exclaimed. "I love thunder and lightning. And we hardly ever get storms like that here. I lived on the prairies for a while, and we often had thunderstorms." A narrow flash of lightning split the blackness that was gradually blotting out the sunlit blue sea and, a moment later, thunder boomed over our heads again.

"That's the perfect introduction to your science lesson," Caroline said. "We talked about atoms a few weeks ago and this storm is a demonstration of their energy."

"So, this storm is made up of gas molecules?"

Caroline nodded. "Of course, because it's part of the atmosphere which surrounds us, pushes on us, and also keeps us alive. But the atmosphere isn't static; it's constantly shifting around and changing. Huge masses of it heat up and cool down, expanding and contracting, always moving."

"I can see it," I said, "in the movements of the storm cloud."

"Yes, that's right. What the atmosphere does is dictated by gas laws. It's constantly pushing itself around, readjusting to conditions. We can't see the actual details, but we have a name for the consequences."

"Weather?"

"Weather," Caroline said, nodding. "The best place to watch a storm is a vast open plain, or an expanse of sea, like we have here. Yesterday, we couldn't see anything in the atmosphere because the air was calm. Nevertheless, invisible air molecules are always pushing, hassling, readjusting and flowing from regions of high pressure to regions of low pressure, responding to heating and cooling, always on the way to somewhere else."

"That's hard to imagine, on a windless, sunny, summer day."

"That's because the adjustments are relatively slow and peaceful," Caroline said, "and there's no hint of the huge amounts of energy carried by the molecules."

She refilled our coffee mugs and waved her hand invitingly at the plate of cookies.

"Yesterday we had some early cloud cover, but this morning was very clear, so the ground heated up more quickly and the air molecules took some of that energy and speeded up. The black cloud out there is energy on the move."

"I can see it and also feel it. Sort of a crackling."

"It's pressure difference pushing that giant slab of boiling, black molecules across the sea. It's dramatic because the structure is unstable. The air molecules haven't had time to rearrange themselves into a more balanced situation. Also, vast amounts of energy are being shunted around, which means the situation is constantly changing."

Another jagged shard of lightning flashed against the black and, seconds later, thunder rolled across the roof. "I can hear the energy, too!"

"We can't see the actual air molecules," Caroline said, "but we can certainly see the results of their movements, the clouds churning and surging. And that's only a hint of the violence going on within them as air packets are buffeted and pummeled, because the imbalances of pressure are so strong that readjustment is a fast, energetic process."

The first large raindrops started to fall, splashing hard and bouncing up off the patio. A strong wind shook the leaves on the cottonwoods to the south of the house and rattled the screen door at the front. The blue sky was gone, and the dark clouds above were moving fast toward the mountains.

Caroline went on. "That wind is showing us how fast air molecules rush around even at ground level. That's a reminder of how much energy there is up in what appears to be a calm blue sky. And a reminder of how energy is constantly being exchanged."

"How do you mean, exchanged?"

"Air molecules can absorb energy from the sun, lose energy to the ocean, gain energy from condensation as clouds form, or lose energy by radiating it away to space. They are constantly adjusting according to the gas law. Our spinning planet with its rough surface makes the adjustments more complicated, and so do clouds, tiny particulates, and the specific gases present."

"Wow! That is complicated!"

Caroline smiled. "Very complicated. So, you can see that a weather forecast is really just a way of keeping track of the battles above our heads and picking out the ones that will affect us most down here on the ground."

"I suspect it's also why meteorologists can't forecast weather for much more than a week, and sometimes not even that."

"Exactly. There are simply too many variables."

I noticed that the storm had now hidden the Coast Mountains, but the sun was appearing again, over our heads. "Oh, look! There's a rainbow!" It shone, brilliant with color, against the darkness of the storm clouds.

Caroline grinned at me. "Would you like me to explain rainbows?"

"Later! My little brain can only absorb one thing at a time." I glanced at my watch.

"Anyway, I should probably head for home now that the rain has stopped."

"Before you go," Caroline said, "I have another April story for you. I hung a crystal in my bedroom window. It faces east, and catches the early morning sunlight, throwing tiny rainbows

everywhere. It's lovely to wake up to. And now, April is hooked on chasing them."

"I don't think cats can see color."

"They can see movement, though." Caroline put her mug on the tray. "And they can see light. Rainbows are just colored light. When I tap the crystal a little bit, rainbows fly around. April goes out of her furry little mind chasing them across the floor and up the wall. She seems sure that one of these times, she's going to actually catch one."

"What a great toy for her!"

"It is," Caroline said, "but I'm not sure I should have started this game. This morning, before the sun rose, she sat beside the bed and stared at the floor, looking for her little rainbow friends. Then she stared at me because she knows I have something to do with making them move. Then she looked back at the floor. That was one time I very much wished she could understand English, so I could explain that it's the sun which causes rainbows, not me."

"I know. I feel the same way when I have to take a cat to the vet. It is very frustrating not to be able to explain why I must do it. Kaylie won't speak to me for a couple of days after I take her in for her shots." I rose.

Caroline picked up the tray and we walked into the kitchen. "At noon today, April came and got me. She led me into the bedroom, meowing the whole way. Then she sat down, stared at the carpet, and then at me. I'm quite sure she wanted me to produce those little rainbows. And, of course, I couldn't explain that the sun was now at the wrong angle to make rainbows through the crystal."

"Give her time," I said, "and she'll train you to produce rainbows when she wants them."

"Right! And I'll bet you believe in the tooth fairy, too."

We laughed, and then I set off for home again, enjoying the fresh, rain-washed air and the sparkling raindrops hanging from leaves everywhere.



A week later, I began to believe that there really were no cats left in the colony that needed neutering. Sunday night's trapping had captured six cats with clipped ears. They all leapt out of the cages and raced into the underbrush, no doubt annoyed, but at least they'd had a taste of good, smelly tuna.

"What do you think?" I asked Zephyrus. "Should we stop trapping?"

"Oh, not yet, please." Her gaze ranged over the yard and the tangled trees beyond. "I know it's asking a lot, but I'd hate to miss any and start the colony growing again."

"We'll do another one next Sunday," Maggie said, "and perhaps even another in the first week of August, just to make sure."

"Will Cal be able to help?" Jimmy asked.

"No," Maggie said. "He's busy weaving his latest masterpiece so as to be ready for the first fall fair in September. I'm having a hard time prying him loose long enough to go for a ride on the motorcycle and you know how he loves that machine."

"Motorcycle?" Zephyrus's eyes had lit up. "That's something I've always wanted to do but felt a little too nervous to try it."

Maggie looked surprised. "It seems to me that flying a plane would be far more dangerous."

Zephyrus smiled. "Not at all. Up in the sky, there's nothing to crash into."

On that note, Jimmy had gone home, and Maggie and I took the empty cages back to my place and put them away in the carport to await the next Sunday raid on the feral colony. On

Monday, I phoned Jerry and said we were running out of cats.

"That's good," he said. "You've done a fine job, you and Maggie."

"And the rest of the volunteers," I said.

"Absolutely! So now, do you suppose you could find time for a bridge game?"

I'd been playing bridge with Jerry and Cindy and various fourths for the eight years Ben and I had lived on Adriana. We were all too busy to play on a regular basis, but probably averaged one game a month. "I was thinking the same thing," I said. "Would you and Cindy like to come out here for a change? Say on Wednesday night?"

He agreed and left it up to me to find a fourth. I assumed that would be easy, but soon found it to be apparently impossible. People were either busy or away. Finally, in desperation, I phoned Caroline. I didn't know if she played, but kept my fingers crossed. There was no use trying to rope Ben into a game; he hated playing cards.

"As a matter of fact, I do play," she said, and I heaved a big sigh of relief. "But I haven't played for a while, so I'm rusty."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "You'll be fine. We're just going to have fun, not set any records."

Now Wednesday night had rolled around, and I was busy setting up the dining room table for our game. Once upon a time, George and Henry had insisted on sleeping on the dining room table, on our cloth place mats, and would only agree to staying on the floor because I promised them bits of chicken or tuna. As soon as the food disappeared into the kitchen, the two fur people got back on the table, and it was hell trying to remove them so we could have a bridge game.

Times had changed, however. No longer did any cats sleep on the dining room table. As soon as I'd stopped forbidding the practice, they lost interest in it. Happy about having a disencatted table, I laid a clean cloth and put out two decks of cards, four bidding boxes, score pads, and pencils. Onto the sideboard went a plate of shortbread cookies, napkins, and glasses ready for drinks. A couple of my cats wandered around and stared at what I was doing but didn't interfere.

Jerry, Cindy, and Caroline arrived more or less simultaneously and were introduced as I took drink orders.

"I'll get the drinks," Ben said. He felt now, he told me, about eighty percent recovered, which meant that he was doing most of the work in the garden. Fortunately for my peace of mind, there was much less to do this late in the season.

By the time we'd settled around the table and cut for deal, Ben was back with the drinks. "I'll say goodnight now," he said. "I'm going to bed, but I'll read for a while."

We all praised him for taking good care of himself and he vanished into the bedroom. I looked at Caroline, who was my partner for the first rubber, and said, "Dr. Giles would be amazed. Ben seems to have turned into the ideal patient."

Caroline smiled. "I've been working on him. Telling him gruesome stories about a fictitious aunt of mine who wouldn't rest when she was told to."

"I'll be eternally grateful," I said.

"Are you a nurse?" Cindy asked Caroline.

"No, a physicist."

Cindy said, "Wow! That kind of stuff takes a knowledge of math, doesn't it?"

"Most definitely," Caroline replied.

"I couldn't do it," Cindy said. "Math makes my brain itch."

"That's why I always keep score," Jerry said.

Cindy stuck out her tongue at him and said, "Did you know that old bridge players never

die, they just shuffle away?"

"Yes, you already told me that one," Jerry said. "I dealt and I bid one no trump."

The game proceeded without incident for an hour or so. Caroline remembered a lot of things about the game that she thought she'd forgotten, and we were, as I'd promised, having a good time.

Then Kaylie decided I'd been allowed to hog the dining room table long enough. While I was in the kitchen getting fresh drinks, she jumped from my chair onto the table. I returned as she stretched out on the dummy hand, looking for the admiration and gentle strokes she felt were her due.

"I'm afraid we're encatted," I said.

"That's Kaylie," Jerry said. "Tell her to go away or I'll trump her. Or give her another needle, like I did last time I saw her."

Telling Kaylie to do anything was like talking to a stone wall. I picked her up and put her on the floor.

Indignant at this insult to her royal person, she leaped back up. Jerry said, "I do not like my game being sabotaged." He lifted her onto his lap and scratched under her chin until she melted into his lap, purring.

"I have another one for you, honey," Cindy said. "Did you know that old bridge players never die, they just stop turning tricks?"

Jerry said, "I'd resent the implications of that if I wasn't so busy right now." He continued to pet Kaylie until she decided he'd had more than his fair share of her exalted presence and jumped down. For a moment, she stared up at the top of the table, but then walked away, ears laid back and tail held high.

It wasn't until Jerry, Cindy, and Caroline left, at around eleven o'clock, that Kaylie returned to the battle. As I was putting glasses into the kitchen sink, I heard a loud crash.

I rushed into the dining room to find that she and two of her grown-up kittens, Caesar and Cato, had leapt onto the table and skidded across it, sliding the cloth half off. Scattered on the carpet were the two decks of cards, four pencils, two score pads, an empty glass, two dying ice cubes and, upside down, a dish of cashews.

The three rebels sat on the end of the table and studied the mess with considerable interest, then looked at me. Isn't that interesting? We have discovered a new art form!

I disencatted the table, crumpled up the cloth to put in the laundry basket, and picked up everything the little monsters had thrown on the floor. I refrained from swearing or screaming only because the super-heated atoms flying out of my mouth would, according to Caroline, merely cause some commotion in the air around me. As I knew from experience, they would have no effect on thick-skinned felines.



Chapter 11 ~ Cats Partying

On the first Saturday in August, Zephyrus phoned to say she wanted to throw a celebration party the following Saturday.

"That sounds like fun," I said. "What are we celebrating?"

"The fact that all the cats in the colony have been neutered," Zephyrus said. "Now the ferals will live out their days peacefully. No fighting, no yowling, and no danger of covering the entire island in kittens. It's the only way I know how to thank you and Maggie and the rest of the volunteers for all you've done."

"Well, I'm always up for a party," I said. "Who else are you asking?"

"Ben, of course."

He'd be pleased, since he'd now decided he was fully cured and Dr. Giles had tentatively agreed, but admonished him to rest the moment he felt tired, at least for another few weeks, just in case.

Zephyrus continued. "Jimmy and Zack are coming. I'll ask Maggie and Cal, Jerry and Cindy, Shelly, Caroline, and Sally. And Duff, of course."

"Don't forget Harry Phillips," I said. "He helped a lot with lugging those cages around." Harry was so quiet that I often forgot he was there, but he was observant and careful, like the fussy old bachelor he'd told me he was, and he'd been a big help.

"I already did," Zephyrus said. "I know he's a nice man, even if he never talks. And I did invite a couple of the others but they're away on vacation."

"How about Melody at the SPCA?" I asked.

"I asked, but she said she was already committed to something else for that night. And you know what, Holly? All six of those kittens have been adopted!"

We agreed that Saturday the eighth would be a fine time for a party. When the call ended, I counted the guests and wondered how we'd all squeeze into Zephyrus's little crooked house. There'd be fourteen of us in all. I decided to take a couple of folding lawn chairs.

When I discussed the party with Maggie next day, I suggested we take some food with us and make it into a sort of potluck.

Maggie thought about that for a minute. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. Zephyrus is intense about thanking us for taking care of her cats and she probably wants to do it all herself."

"It's an awful lot of work, though."

"I know. Let's compromise. We'll both take something but leave our contributions in the vehicles until we see how she's managing."

The week flew by, as all summer weeks fly by, including the very last cat trapping, which, once again, caught only cats with clipped ears. I wrote myself a note to return the cat traps to the SPCA on Monday and stuck it on the fridge.

Ben came out of the bedroom, wearing a clean pair of jeans, which passed for being 'dressed up' on the island. "Should we take Nicky and BJ?" he asked. "I'm sure they'll behave. Besides, they'll be lonely by themselves." Maggie and Cal had dropped BJ off at our house to keep Nicky company.

"I know they both adore cats," I said, "but it's likely that none of the cats who live at Zephyrus's place are at all fond of dogs."

"But if we leave them at home, they might tear the house apart."

Nicky had done this once before, when Ben and I had gone out for the evening. We came

home to find a couple of ancient pillows ripped open and feathers drifting all over the house. "I think we'll have to risk it," I said.

Ben sighed as theatrically as Nicky did two minutes later when we locked him and BJ into the mud room. I handed Ben the big pot of chili I'd made, he put it in the back of the Cherokee, and we headed slowly south. I was getting quite good at steering around the potholes on Macklin Road. We'd been a little late getting started and, judging by the number of vehicles, we were the last to arrive and therefore had to park in front of Sybil's house.

"I'll carry the chili," Ben said.

"No, leave it here in the car. We'll just take the folding chairs."

"But I thought this was a potluck," Ben protested.

"Zephyrus didn't say it was a potluck and Maggie and I believe she wanted to do the whole meal herself to thank us all. If it turns out to be a potluck, then one of us can come back and get the chili." We did, however, take a half dozen bottles of Beck's, Ben's favorite beer, and a small flask of scotch for me. Zephyrus might want to pay for the food, but nobody would expect her to supply drinks.

Our hostess had lucked in on the weather. At six o'clock, the sun was shining warmly and would do so for nearly another three hours. The wind that normally blew in off the sea at this time of day had gone away to spend its energy elsewhere. I tried to imagine oxygen molecules flying all over the place but couldn't manage it; the air was too calm.

The *Garden Guys* pickup was parked at the street end of Zephyrus's driveway, blocking it, and making the driveway and the narrow strip of lawn from there to the house available for the guests. A table had been set up under the shade of the big Garry oak at the south end of the house, and was covered with bowls and platters of food, along with cutlery and plates.

As we walked past the pickup, Zephyrus left her conversation with Maggie and Cal and hurried toward us. "I'm so glad you're here. Now we can start the party!" She turned and called, "Zack, bring out the punch, please. Everybody's here!"

By the time we'd said hello to the other ten people, Zack was putting a punch bowl on the table. Jimmy followed with a stack of cups.

"But that punch has ice cream floating in it!" I said. "I didn't know you could make punch with ice cream."

"You need to get out more, Holly," Zack said, with a smile. "It's also got orange sherbet, pineapple juice, and ginger ale in it. Very refreshing for an August day."

"I probably need to spend more time reading my cookbooks," I said, as I filled a cup with punch. The food spread out on the table was impressive, and beautifully presented: chicken wings, sliced ham and beef, deviled eggs, three kinds of salad, buns, and a cheese board with at least six different types of cheese. At the end of the table was a plate of what looked like sugar cookies decorated with candied violets.

I turned to Zephyrus. "Did you do all this by yourself?"

She laughed. "Of course not."

"You did it then," I said, looking at Zack.

"Nope."

Zephyrus grinned. "The Apple Tree did it. They cater for parties, you know."

So, she'd ordered it and paid for it. I thought about how much it must have cost and couldn't help wincing. But it was her money, after all, and if she enjoyed spending it, more power to her.

"I wanted to have the best for the people looking after my cats," said Zephyrus. She raised her voice so everyone could hear her. "Thank you all for what you've done. You've made me

very happy and set my mind at rest."

Maggie raised her cup and said, "As president of the *Adriana Cat Rescue Society*, I believe I'm entitled to make a speech."

A couple of people groaned.

"But I'll keep it short," Maggie said, and smiled. "The *Adriana Cat Rescue Society* has spent almost all its money, but we will keep on asking for donations or having bake sales or whatever is necessary to raise money to feed the cats. The colony is likely to be around for several years and it's our purpose to care for it."

Zephyrus stepped forward and hugged Maggie. Then she turned toward the rest of us, and I could see she had tears in her eyes. "No more speeches! It's food and drink time, so dig in!"

The idea of bringing folding chairs had been popular with other people as well, and soon we were all sitting in a small circle, with plates of food in our laps.

Sally Fraser wandered around and snapped several pictures of us filling our faces. When she sat down again, she said, "I've learned something about cats in the last few months. They exist in three states of matter: loaf, cinnamon roll, and liquid."

"Is that a fact?" asked Duff.

"Well, I guess not really," Sally replied. "But they seem able to squish themselves into any shape they want, and sometimes they appear to be liquid."

"I've always thought that their bones are made of rubber," I said.

"In actual fact," Maggie said, "cats are super flexible in general, and their collar bones are only attached by muscle, not bone, which adds to their flexibility. This means that if their head fits through a space, it's likely the rest of them can too, which is why some cats can squeeze under doors or out of windows that look barely open."

Duff said, "I have a fact to match that one. Cats are either right- or left-pawed."

"Are any of them ambidextrous?" I asked, suspecting that he might be joking.

"Yes," he said, "about forty percent. But don't ask me how the researchers know."

"I've got a fact for you, too," Shelly Norton said, putting her fork down on her empty plate. "But it's about birds, because I'm an amateur birdwatcher. Scientifically, a raven has 17 primary wing feathers, the big ones at the end of the wing. They are called pinion feathers. A crow has 16. So, the difference between a crow and a raven is only a matter of a pinion."

When the laughter had died down, Jimmy said, "Well, that's something for the ravens to crow about."

More laughter. Then Shelly admitted that her 'fact' was not a fact, but an old joke.

"If we're going to talk about animals in general," Duff said, "I have another fact for you, and I don't think anybody can dispute this one. Millions of trees are accidentally planted by squirrels who bury nuts and then forget where they hid them."

People began getting up to refill their plates or sample the desserts. Duff, whose squirrel fact hadn't gotten more than a chuckle, tried again. "We'll have to eat all the cookies. Cats don't have the ability to taste sweet things. And that's a fact, too."

That also didn't rate more than a chuckle, and when we were all seated again, Caroline said, "Can I take a turn now? Have any of you wondered why ducks swimming in freezing water don't appear to feel the cold?"

"I have," said Cal. "There's a pond out back of my place and, in the worst winter weather, I've watched ducks walking around on the ice. Always wondered why their feet didn't freeze and fall off."

"It's based on the principle of heat transfer," Caroline said. "The more energetic molecules in

a hot object will bump into the molecules in a cold object and make the cold object warmer."

"But one small duck couldn't heat up a whole pond," Cal objected.

"You're right," Caroline said. "In the warm center of the duck, the temperature of its blood is about 40 Celsius. If that blood gets anywhere near the freezing water, it will quickly lose its heat to the cold molecules of water."

"So how do they stay warm?" asked Sally.

Caroline said, "The bigger the temperature difference between two objects when they touch, the faster heat will flow from one to the other. As the ducks paddle along, warm blood is flowing down the arteries of each leg. But those arteries are right next to the veins carrying cool blood back from the feet. Thus, the molecules in the warm blood jostle the blood vessel walls, which then jostle the cooler blood. The warm blood going to the feet gets cooler, and the blood going back into the body is warmed up."

"And that keeps the duck's feet from freezing?" Ben asked.

"Look at it this way," Caroline said. "All the way down the duck's legs, heat that came from the duck's body is being transferred to the blood that's going back the other way, without going near the duck's feet. But the blood itself goes all the way around. By the time the duck's blood reaches its webbed feet, it's pretty much the same temperature as the water. Because its feet aren't much hotter than the water, they lose very little heat. And then as the blood travels back up towards the middle of the duck, it gets heated up by the blood coming down."

"I see. At least I think I do," Sally said.

"If the duck can make sure that the heat doesn't get to its feet," Caroline went on, "it has almost eliminated the possibility of losing energy that way. So, ducks can happily stand on the ice precisely because their feet are cold. And they don't care."

"Fascinating!" I said. "Does that work for other animals? I suppose it must."

"Absolutely," Caroline replied. "Dolphins and turtles have a similar layout of blood vessels in their tails and flippers so that when they swim into colder water, they can maintain their internal temperature. It works for Arctic foxes, too, and polar bears. Their paws have to be in direct contact with ice and snow, but they can still keep their vital organs warm. It's very simple, but very effective."

We all began to move around again, getting dessert, getting coffee, pouring what Ben always called 'real' drinks. He opened a beer for himself and, when Zephyrus saw this, she said, "Ben, may I have one of your beers?"

"Of course!" He took the cap off the beer bottle. "Wait, I'll get you a glass."

Zephyrus took the bottle out of his hand. "I don't want a glass, thank you. I've always thought that the best way to drink beer is right out of the bottle. Don't you agree?"

"Actually, I do," Ben said. They clinked beer bottles and grinned at each other.

We stood around, or walked around, in twos and threes, sharing gossip, speculating about where the ferals were hiding, drinking our drinks, and enjoying the last of the sunlight. The air was mellow and so were we.

At eight-thirty, Zephyrus roused us from our drifting by saying, "I must feed the ferals before sundown."

"I'll help," Harry said. "Show me what to do."

The two of them went off to distribute dry food in various places. When they came back, I was amused to see that Harry was talking to Zephyrus as if he'd known her all his life. It must be the shared love of cats, I thought. I'd always thought Harry was shy, but perhaps his only interest was the feline race. If I could get him talking to me, maybe I could find out where he'd come

from, what he'd done for a living.

The party began to break up. Maggie and Cal were the first to go, Cal insisting that he had to get a couple of hours in at the loom before bedtime. They were quickly followed by Jerry and Cindy, then Shelly and, finally, Sally and her camera.

"You're not all going to leave, are you?" Zephyrus demanded. "I'm just getting warmed up."

"I'm happy to keep partying," I said. "Ben, are you okay with that?"

"I'm perfectly fine," he said. "I'm completely better, you know."

It would take more than his statement to convince me. But his normal stubbornness had certainly reasserted itself!

"Let's move into the house," Zephyrus said. "It's getting a bit too cool to sit outside. For me, anyway. Besides, I'd like to let the ferals eat in peace."



By nine o'clock, we'd cleared away the leftovers and put the table back behind the garage, where it had apparently lived for many years. The borrowed chairs were folded and ready to be carried away, and the remaining eight of us sprawled around Zephyrus's small living room with fresh drinks.

I was about to ask where Percy, Pru, and Little Cat were hiding, when I noticed that they weren't hiding at all. All three were sitting in front of Harry, who had scrunched down into the easy chair in the corner.

Then I noticed that Harry was ignoring the cats. Or pretending to. One by one, they got up and went over to sniff him. He still ignored them. Little Cat jumped onto his lap, walked up his chest, sat down on his shoulder, and sniffed his hair. Percy and Pru followed her but settled for sharing his lap. A moment later, Harry was scratching behind their ears or petting them. And smiling.

"Isn't that interesting!" Caroline exclaimed. "He must smell right to them."

"And, as I may have said before," I offered, "he paid no attention to them, so they decided he was non-threatening and therefore safe to sit on."

Harry said nothing. He just went on ruffling fur and looking pleased.

"Well, Ben," Jimmy said, "how are you feeling these days?"

"Much better," Ben said. "In fact, Dr. Giles thinks I'm probably completely cured."

"It must have been tough sitting around doing nothing," Zack remarked. "It would drive me nuts not to be able to do what I want whenever I want."

"It did at first," Ben said, "but I learned to be patient."

I held my tongue.

Ben went on. "Our cats helped a lot. Cats have such a relaxed attitude towards life. After I'd watched them sitting on the bed doing nothing for hours on end, I realized I should try to be more like them. They're rather like miniature Buddhas, you know. Calm, patient, accepting."

This time, I had to bite my tongue. Ben knew more about cats than this drivel he was spouting.

"Anyway," Ben added, "one of the old Romans I admire so much, Cato the Elder, said, 'Patience is the greatest of all virtues.'"

It had been some time since Ben quoted the wise old Romans that he was so fond of. Perhaps he'd been rereading their words during some of the time when he was supposed to be sleeping.

From the quiet depths of Harry's armchair came the words, "Men willingly believe what they wish. That is attributed to Julius Caesar."

Harry was watching Ben, and Ben had swung around in his chair to stare at Harry. After a pause, he said, "There is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it. That's from Cicero."

Harry grinned. "And Ovid wrote, 'Take rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop.'"

Ben picked up his chair and moved over to sit by Harry. A match made in heaven, I thought, if Harry was also a student of ancient Rome. And I was pleased for Ben, because if it were true, now he'd have somebody to share his avocation with. Not only that, of course, but Ben might find out some of Harry's history and satisfy my curiosity.

From the other corner of the room, Duff tried again. "I have another interesting fact. Leonardo Da Vinci invented the scissors."

Zephyrus rose, leaned over Duff, and kissed him on the cheek. "Of course, he did," she said. "You do know the most interesting tidbits."

Duff was so startled that he got up, fled to the kitchen, and I could hear liquid splashing into a glass.

When he came back, I went to the kitchen and brought back another beer for Zephyrus along with a small refill of scotch for myself, keeping in mind that I still had to negotiate a thousand potholes in order to get home to my bed. And possibly also avoid a few raccoons or cattle wandering across the road.

Zephyrus eyed her fresh bottle of Beck's with affection and leaned back in her chair. "I don't believe life could be any better," she said. "My cats are taken care of, and I've got money to spend. And everybody has been so good to me, so kind." Her smile for Jimmy and Zack was especially warm.

"Which do you think are smarter, cats or dogs?" asked Duff.

"Why?" I asked. "Do you have another fact?"

He shook his head. "No, it's just something I've thought about now and then. Frankly, I'd say that asking which species is smarter is like asking if a hammer is a better tool than a screwdriver."

"Good one!" I said. "Perfect. And that's a fact. I've got both cats and dogs and they're smart in different ways. My cats have brilliantly trained me to cater to their every whim, yet after all these years, they still believe the vacuum cleaner is out to destroy them. But the dogs adore being vacuumed."

Caroline leaned forward. "I have a good feeling sitting here, as I did all through the party. Everything feels right, everything feels in balance." She looked around and saw that we were expecting more. "The physical world, all of it, only ever has one destination: equilibrium."

"Why is that?" Zack asked.

"Because if everything is balanced, there are no forces trying to move anything. If you think about a canal lock," Caroline said, "when no boats are moving through, the water is still, even though it's at different heights. The water is in equilibrium and will stay that way until a gate is opened and gravity pulls the water downward."

Zack responded, "You can get a lot done in the world by controlling where the equilibrium position is."

"Exactly!" Caroline went on. "Left to themselves, things shuffle around until everything is balanced and then they stay there. The way to get things done is to be in control of where equilibrium is. If you can move the goalposts on demand, you can make sure that things flow in the direction you want them to go, and only when you tell them to do it."

"So, by neutering the ferals, we've put their world into equilibrium," Zephyrus said.

"I'm sure that's a fair assessment," Caroline said. "The physical world will always move towards balance. Hot and cold liquids will mix until everything is the same temperature, and a balloon will expand until the pressure is equal inside and out. That's related to the concept that time only flows one way. The world can't run backwards. Water is never going to flow by itself through a lock from the lower level to the higher level."

Zack said, "So, we don't create energy and we don't destroy it. We merely move the goalposts and divert it. The physical world is always ticking along towards equilibrium. But humans have become good at moving the goalposts. We may not create energy, but we sure know how to use it."

"What a serious conversation!" Zephyrus said. Suddenly she yawned. "Oh dear, I guess I've run out of energy. And I have no goal posts to move."

"We should go and let you get to bed," I said, glancing over at Ben, who was still in deep discussion with Harry.

Zephyrus rose. "Don't even think about it. Stay as long as you like and eat and drink till you're done." She grinned. "Until you're in equilibrium. But I'm going to bed. My eyes are not going to stay open another minute."

She went to her bedroom door, turned, and called the three cats. They jumped off Harry's lap and followed her as she went inside and closed the door.

I glanced at Jimmy and Zack, who knew her better than any of the rest of us, but they remained relaxed on the couch. "It's okay," Jimmy said. "She's done this kind of thing before."

The rest of us went on talking quietly about nothing in particular for another half hour. But I, too, was feeling the call of a soft bed.

"Ben, shall we go? The dogs will be dying to get out."

St. Francis immediately responded, as he always did when the welfare of animals was at stake. He said to Harry, "We'll have to get together. I'd like you to come and see my collection of books on ancient Rome and give me your opinion on them."

"Of course," Harry said. "And I might have some you'd like to borrow."

I said to the others, as they were edging toward the front door, "I'll just open the door to Zephyrus's bedroom, so the cats can get out to use the litterbox during the night."

Zephyrus's bedside lamp was on low, and I couldn't resist a glance. She lay on her back, with a small smile on her face, while the three cats curled up beside her. Her chest gently rose and fell with her breathing. I left the door cracked open about a foot.

As we went out, locking the front door behind us, I said, "I'll come around in the morning, probably by nine, and clean up the kitchen."

"We'll come over, too," Jimmy said. "It won't take long with three of us working. Besides, we're the only ones with a key and we'll need to let you in."

I raised my hand in farewell as the two men walked down the road toward their own place, and the others went to their vehicles. Then Ben and I walked to the Cherokee and climbed in.

"I found out a lot about Harry," Ben said. "He's a professor. He taught the Classics in a college."

"Where?"

"Where? What difference does that make?" Ben asked.

I didn't answer and, finally, Ben said, "Oh, it's that curiosity of yours. Sometimes I swear you're part cat. Well, we just talked about Rome, really."

"I thought you said you found out a lot about Harry."

"I did. He knows a lot about Rome."

Ben said nothing more and I knew I'd have to be satisfied with the fact that Harry knew a lot about ancient Rome. But, when he came over to look at Ben's library, I'd have my chance. With my six cats holding him down, Harry wouldn't have a chance against me.



Chapter 12 ~ Cats at Home

I woke up early Sunday morning to find that the skies were gray and sending a steady rain pattering down. This weather looked like it could settle in for the whole day and I was glad Zephyrus had had her party the night before. Still, the sun might come out later. Ben often said that Adriana Island is like every other place in the world: if you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes and it'll change.

He was still asleep when Nicky and the cats and I finished breakfast, and I decided he'd probably overdone it a trifle by staying late at the party. I fed the chickens and let them out, managing to out bluff Mr. Mighty, the rooster, about which of us was boss. Then I fed the deer, who were, of course, hanging around waiting for a handout. Ben hadn't wakened by the time I finished his chores, so I left a note propped up against the clock on his bedside table, slipped on a jacket, and headed south to wash Zephyrus's dishes.

The *Garden Guys* pickup was in the driveway, and I parked behind it, then hurried through the raindrops to the front door, rapped once, and went in.

I could smell coffee, always a welcome aroma in the morning, and found Zack and Jimmy at the kitchen sink, working on a pile of dirty dishes. Zephyrus sat at the table, watching, and still looking as happy as she had the night before. Zack handed me his dish towel and said, "Here, you can take over. I'm going to pack up The Apple Tree stuff and load it into the pickup."

"You people are really spoiling me," Zephyrus said.

"We know you don't want help if you can manage things yourself," said Jimmy, "but parties are special. They're a whole lot more fun if you don't have to clean up afterward. And I'll bet that was the first party you've had in a long time."

"You're absolutely right," Zephyrus said, "but the next time I throw a party, I'll wash the dishes myself."

However, she sat quietly at the table, enjoying her coffee, and not looking very worried about it, until we were done.

"Anything else to do?" I asked Jimmy.

He shook his head. "All done, including the vacuuming." He picked up his baseball cap from the end of the counter. "We're off now. Landed a big landscaping job over in Mora Bay, and we need to get started today."

"But it's raining." Then I glanced out the kitchen window and realized that the rain had quit, and the clouds were clearing away. "Okay, it's not raining. Wait five minutes!"

The boys left and I sat down to share the last of the coffee with Zephyrus. "Where are Percy, Pru, and Little Cat?"

"Having their morning nap," Zephyrus said. "You know cats. No day is complete without at least half a dozen naps. They're probably on my bed, which means I can't make it."

"Oh, too bad!"

"Yes, isn't it!" Zephyrus grinned. "Holly, can we go to your house now? I woke up at five this morning, and decided it was time to make my will. I need two people to witness my signature."

"Sure," I said. "That's no problem." I was a bit surprised that she didn't have a will already, considering her age. But plenty of people backed away from the thought of death.

She rose, went to the fridge, and pulled out a covered plastic dish. "I saved these sugar cookies for Ben, because he kept saying how much he loved them."

"I think he fell for the candied violets on top. He doesn't get that kind of fancy cooking from me."

We went out and, as Zephyrus locked the door, I saw two feral cats sitting on the roof of the old Chevy, their tails wrapped around their feet. Both were a soft, light gray, with white chests and a white blaze on their noses. They were watching us but seemed calm and unafraid.

"Rosco and Rosalie," Zephyrus said.

"Second or third generation?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. But I'm sure those two are the dominant cats in this colony. They often sit out in full view like that, watching."

"They look happy."

"And so they should," Zephyrus said. "The ones that are left are healthy, and they don't have to have mating squabbles anymore."

The sight of those two dignified felines surveying their territory made all the past trapping hassles worthwhile. And they were still sitting there, watching, when Zephyrus and I climbed into the Jeep and headed north to Holly Haven.

When we arrived and had given Nicky and BJ their treats, Ben came out of the garden enclosure. "Is it coffee time?" he asked. "I'm ready."

We sat around the kitchen table with fresh coffee and a plate of sugar cookies. "Zephyrus has drawn up a will," I said, "and she wants us to witness her signature."

"I want more than that," she said. "I want you both to read it and see if it sounds right. I don't want any arguments over it afterward. I'll get a lawyer to do it if you think that would be better. But, if you read it, you can't tell anybody what it says."

Perhaps I should have objected, and told her to see a lawyer anyway, but my curiosity was too strong. I unfolded the single sheet of paper and was so surprised by what I read that I handed it to Ben and took a sip of coffee before I could get my head together enough to ask questions.

"Zephyrus," I said, "don't you have any family? No siblings? No cousins? Nor even third or fourth cousins?"

"Nobody," she said. "I was an only child and so was my son. He died without leaving either a wife or children and there's no family to fight over who inherits. The only people who might fight it would be Zack and Jimmy, which is why you can't say anything. I don't want to listen to them telling me I don't know what I'm doing."

Ben put the will down on the table. "I understand that," he said. "Those boys would say they didn't want the property, that it isn't fair that they should have it."

"It's my property to do with as I please and I want them to have it. They can't argue against that. If they really don't want to keep it, they can sell it, though I hope they don't."

"I doubt if they would sell it," I said. "They care about those feral cats, too, and there's no guarantee that a buyer would agree to leaving them in peace. They might even copy Sybil and try to poison the cats."

"The boys could do a lot of different things with the land," Ben said. "They could take the old field that abuts their property and grow Christmas trees or something."

"Or holly bushes, or fruit trees, or maybe raspberries," I said.

"They could rent the house out," Zephyrus said. "To a cat lover, because I'd like my three house cats to stay where they are. I hate to think of them being adopted and having to move to strange territory."

"Renting is a good idea!" I said. "How about renting to a small rock band? That would keep Sybil amused at night."

Ben frowned at me. "You know perfectly well that Sybil's in a care home now."

"Of course, I know that." Duff had passed on this delightful information a couple of days previously. He'd also said that Thea and Fred still hadn't decided what to do with Sybil's property. "But, just for a minute, I wanted to savor the thought of a rock band blasting at Sybil's windows, say around two in the morning."

"Enjoy your little joke," Ben said. He turned to Zephyrus. "We never know how the future is going to turn out, but I believe you've made a wise choice. If you're ready to sign, we're ready to witness it."

When this was accomplished, Ben folded it and put it in a clean envelope. "Now, are you going to put this in a safety deposit box in the bank?"

Zephyrus shook her head. "No. I don't trust banks all that much."

"But..."

Zephyrus interrupted. "I have a metal box at home where I keep important papers. It's supposed to be fireproof."

But was it? I thought about Sybil trying to set fire to the place.

Ben opened his mouth again and Zephyrus interrupted again. "Don't sweet-talk me, Ben Sutton! My mind's made up on that point. Though I might give in enough to keep the box in the fridge freezer."

"Okay." Ben conceded defeat. "Whatever you think is best." He paused. "I noticed that you appointed Peter Hornick as executor. Did you tell him you were going to do that?" Peter Hornick was a semi-retired lawyer working part-time in Mora Bay.

"Oh, don't worry, Ben. That's Holly's job. I'll phone Peter tomorrow and tell him."

Zephyrus rose. "I don't want to mess up your Sunday entirely, so could you take me home, Holly? I want to sit under the Garry oak and think about last night's party for a while. And then I'll have a nap with my fur-balls. Now that everything about my life is all tidied up, I just want to relax today and savor the feeling."

"Perfect!"



August segued into September and mellow sunshine. Ben, now fully recovered from mono, put his garden to bed and confined his gardening to the greenhouse. George the Magnificent caught a rat, the first in several years, and pranced around the house as if he'd conquered the world. He even eyed Kaylie as if she were prey and I could imagine him thinking, "And you're next, if you don't behave!" I'm sure she heard him thinking it, too, for she stopped pushing his boundaries. I didn't know how long that would last, but I decided to enjoy peace in the feline world while I could.

We held a trustee meeting in mid-September, and that also turned out to be peaceful. We'd received only two complaints and they were easily dealt with, so Joanna, Duff, and I adjourned early and went into the main area of The Yellow Duck, to indulge in cheeseburgers and beer.

"Why so quiet, Joanna?" Duff asked. She'd hardly said a word since she'd arrived.

"One of my good friends died last week," she said, "and I miss her. She lived a few hundred yards down the road from me and we used to get together a lot. She was a lovely woman. But now her property and her bees are up for sale."

"Bees?" I said.

Joanna nodded. "Amelia kept bees and sold honey."

Duff put down his bottle of beer. "Fact: honey is the only food that doesn't spoil. Honey found in the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs has been tasted by archaeologists and found edible."

"Wow, Duff, that's so sympathetic!" I exclaimed.

He blinked. "Oh, sorry about that. And I'm sorry about Amelia, too, Joanna. But that is a fact about the honey."

"You know what?" I said to him, "It's not fair that Amelia, who was a nice person, is dead, yet Sybil the bitch is still living!"

Duff was silent for a moment. "Think of it this way, Holly. Sybil's alive, but she has to live with herself, which must be really tough. She's always angry, and anger is a very acidic emotion. I'm also pretty sure that nobody loves her, including her daughter."

It was my turn to be silent, while I digested this different point of view. "Thanks, Duff. You're probably right."

"Good! By the way, speaking of Egypt, did you know that ancient Egyptians shaved off their eyebrows to mourn the deaths of their cats?"

"You're kidding!" I said.

"Nope," Duff said, "I can supply the reference."

"Are you suggesting, perhaps, that Joanna should shave off her eyebrows to mourn Amelia?"

"Now, Holly, did I say that?"

Joanna chuckled. "No, you didn't, Duff. But Amelia would have loved it. The idea of a bunch of islanders walking around with their eyebrows shaved off would have kept her laughing for weeks."

The cheeseburgers arrived and we were silent for a minute or two while we satisfied the pangs of hunger brought on by the delicious smell of melted cheese.

"I have gossip," Duff said.

Both Joanna and I perked up and put down our cheeseburgers. "What?" I asked.

"Harry Phillips is moving in with Zephyrus."

"What!" All kinds of thoughts raced through my mind. Was it romance? Was it cats? What? And why hadn't she told me? I'd talked to her less than a week before.

Duff grinned. His gossip usually wasn't so shocking. "It's not like it sounds. He's renting a room from her. Board and room, I guess."

It took a minute for that to sink in. Then I laughed in delight. "That's perfect! He loves cats and Zephyrus will have someone right there to help her with them."

"Yes," Duff said. "I've talked to him a couple of times lately, and it turns out he's not just a professor. His hobby is woodworking, so he knows how to handle a hammer and saw and enjoys doing it. He says that house of Zephyrus's needs work and he's looking forward to doing it, bit by bit."

"What a perfect arrangement!" I said. "It means less work for the Cat Rescue Society, too. We'll still pay for the food, but we won't need to go feed cats unless Harry or Zephyrus needs a break."

I was still puzzled as to why Zephyrus hadn't mentioned the arrangement and I said as much to Ben when I got home and sat down with him while he ate his lunch-time ham sandwich.

"Because it only just happened," Ben said. "About two days ago, I think."

"But that means you knew about it!"

Ben nodded. "You know I went into Mora Bay last night, to spend some time with Harry and discuss ancient Rome. Well, that's when Harry told me that he and Zephyrus had come to a

satisfactory agreement."

"But why didn't you tell me?" I was truly indignant.

Ben put the last bit of his sandwich on the plate, while Nicky nudged his elbow in hopes of distracting him long enough to make a grab for the food. "'When did I have the chance?'"

I blinked. Then thought about the sequence of events. "Oh, right. I was asleep when you got home last night. And you were barely awake when I left for the trustee meeting this morning." Another question arose. "But how did Duff know?"

"With the way your curiosity works overtime, I can't imagine why you didn't ask Duff that question yourself." Ben grinned and surprised Nicky by offering the dog the last bite of sandwich.

That last bite disappeared almost as fast as my realization that I'd been too polite to quiz Duff. Well, if politeness was going to hamper my acquisition of knowledge, I'd just have to get over being polite.



Right after Ben went back to work, I walked over to Maggie's house to tell her the news.

"That's wonderful," she said. "It'll be good for Zephyrus to have a man around the house to do the things she can't. She'll feel much more secure."

On my way over to Caroline's to share the news with her, I thought about what it would be like to live on Holly Haven all by myself and felt some quick pangs of guilt. It seemed clear that I should appreciate Ben more than I did.

Caroline had the same reaction as Maggie to the news. "I must admit," she said, "that I've been worrying about Zephyrus a bit, looking after a house and a bunch of hungry little cats at her age." Suddenly she grinned. "As a matter of fact, I told myself that the situation actually had sufficient gravity to justify worry. Then I realized it's your job to worry about things. And I decided that your next science lesson would be about gravity."

I took the cup of coffee she handed me and followed her into the living room, where we could look at the blue sea and the yellow leaves of young aspens among the dark green of fir and cedar. "It means you don't need to help Zephyrus feed those cats anymore."

"No, but I'll probably go once in a while, anyway, to keep my hand in. And I like Zephyrus."

"Where's April?"

"Having her afternoon nap on top of my dresser in the bedroom. She does not allow interruptions, not even the company of cat lovers."

"Okay, I guess I'll live. So, what about gravity?"

"We live with it every day," Caroline said, "and we just accept that things sink or fall and recognize that even feathers floating in the air fall eventually, without thinking about the cause of it all, which is the force of gravity."

"It's useful, isn't it?" I asked. "It keeps everything on the floor in an organized, reliable fashion, where we're used to believing it belongs. It must be hell trying to function in a ship out in space."

Caroline smiled. "You could eat a double chocolate chunk muffin with no problem because you could hang on to it. But you'd have to sip your coffee through a straw." She put her own coffee mug down on the coffee table. "The trouble with forces is that you can't see them. But gravity is one you can play with because it's always there, with the same strength, and pointing in the same direction."

"How would I play with gravity?"

"Jump off a diving board into a swimming pool. Diving is somewhere between utter freedom and utter madness. The moment you leave the board, you are completely free of the feeling of gravity."

"It hasn't gone away, though, has it?"

"No," said Caroline, "it's just that you're giving in to it completely, so there's nothing to push against. It's as if you're floating in space, which is where the feeling of freedom comes from."

"But it can't last long," I said.

"Exactly. The problem comes a second later, when you arrive at the water's surface. You can either make your body into an arrow or do a belly flop, which hurts. When you first jump off a diving board, you're going slowly, but you very quickly speed up because gravity changes your speed, accelerates you."

"Is that because I'm relatively heavy?" I asked. "Gravity doesn't seem to speed up leaves or dandelion fluff."

Caroline nodded. "For leaves and dandelion fluff, the force of air pushing back on them is pretty big compared with the gravitational pull, and so a balance between the push of air and the pull of gravity is reached at a relatively low speed."

"But for me, air pressure wouldn't keep me floating, would it?"

"No. If you want to know how hard you'd crash, your terminal velocity close to the ground is around 120 miles per hour."

"Ouch!"

Caroline slid the plate of peanut butter cookies a little closer to where I was curled up in a chair. She opened her mouth as if to continue the lecture, then let it widen into a smile. I turned to see what she was smiling at, and there was Princess April, trotting toward her. The cat jumped up on the sofa and curled up in Caroline's lap. She started kneading, all the while purring and looking adoringly up into Caroline's face.

Caroline looked over at me. "This little princess accidentally got locked in the spare room closet this morning. I was getting some sweaters for fall wear and didn't know she was in there exploring. Naturally I shut the door on my way out. I finally figured out that's where she must be, so I went to let her out."

"I'll bet you heard plenty about your sins!"

"Oh, she had an awful time," said Caroline, stroking April's head. "She told me it was dark in that closet, and lonely, and I ignored her when she scratched at the door. Not only that, but she was hungry and thirsty."

"My goodness, she must have been worried."

"Oh, yes, she endured a whole 20 minutes of agony, poor little girl." Caroline smiled at me to indicate she was being facetious. But she wasn't sounding quite as facetious as I expected.

"Her chances for survival seem bright, though," I said drily, wondering if I finally dared to ask Caroline the crucial question. If she gave me the right answer, it would be one more thing I could quit worrying about.

Caroline waved her hand invitingly at the cookies.

I shook my head. "No, thanks. But I do have another question. Would you like me to go on looking for another home for April?"

Caroline looked at me as if I were some alien monster. "Are you out of your mind? April needs me!"

The calico turned her head to look at me and I could have sworn she had a smug expression.

I probably wore a smug expression myself. I'd banked on her ending the caper to suit herself, and she'd come through with flying colors.



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Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier
Charger the Weapon
Charger the God
The Missing Year
The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

ABOUT THE BOOK

As a trustee for Adriana Island, Holly must deal with complaints about a very large feral cat colony on Zephyrus's property. She also promises to find a home for the woman's April, a little-old-lady calico cat who is a loner. This leads her to Caroline, a retired physicist who agrees to give April a temporary home and, along the way, teaches Holly a little science. Holly's husband Ben gets mononucleosis and fights the doctor's prescription of rest because spring is the busiest time of year for his market garden. Will Holly survive Ben's grumpiness? Will she save the feral cats in colony from being poisoned? Will April find her forever home?

AUTHOR BIO

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.

